

## ABSTRACT

TITLE OF DISSERTATION: STAGING BLACK WOMEN'S HISTORIES:  
RECOVERY AND RECUPERATION IN THE  
THEATRE OF GLENDA DICKERSON

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This dissertation is a critical study of artisan and pedagogue Glenda Dickerson (1945-2012). Glenda Dickerson, whose career spans a little over forty years, held many roles within the field of American/Black/Feminist theatre: playwright, director, folklorist, performer, choreographer, adapter/conceiver, and educator. Dickerson was the second African American woman to direct on Broadway with the 1980 production, *Reggae, a Musical Revelation*. After a successful run in commercial theatre, Glenda Dickerson chose to place her efforts in developing works more intended for academic and community-oriented theatre. Dickerson's career in theatre was quite distinctive. Despite the ways in which Glenda Dickerson challenged racial and gendered boundaries within both professional and academic theatre, and with her pioneering of contemporary Black theatre as well as a Black feminist theatre, Dickerson's legacy is still largely unknown, and, most strikingly, severely under-documented within the scholarly histories of theatre and performance. Accordingly, this dissertation provides a genealogy of Dickerson's career, highlighting some of the historical and socio-cultural influences that shaped her life and work in the theatre. Additionally, this dissertation critically examines several of her unpublished, contemporary dramatic works: *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* (2001), *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer* (2003), *Sapphire's New Show: The Kitchen Table Summit* (2004), and *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* (2005). By highlighting major themes found within these works and providing both a historical and theoretical study of her writing, devising, and staged performances, this dissertation aims to situate Dickerson as a forerunner of contemporary Black theatre as well as contemporary Black feminist theatre

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THE THEATRE OF GLENDA DICKERSON

by

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Dissertation submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the  
University of Maryland, College Park, in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
2018

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## **Dedication**

For my mother, Meredith “Terri” Long, whose own life experiences are documented somewhere in these pages. And because it is Black feminism that taught me how to grant grace. I love you, Mommy!

## Acknowledgements

First, I would like to pay homage to the ancestors for guiding my: Glenda Dickerson (1945-2012). Thank you for entrusting me with your story.

I also pay homage to my grand/father Chris C. White (1932-2012), my brother Hasan Anthony Long, (1977-2005), my Aunt Lillian “Patsy” Harper-Gary (1939-2017), and my mentor Professor Edythe Scott Bagley (1924-2011).

My advisor, Dr. Faedra Chatard Carpenter, told me during my first day of class, “I am your biggest advocate.” Not once has she faltered from that role. I don’t think she knows how truly grateful I am for having her in my corner during these six long years. And when it came to the end, when I was ready to give-up and throw in the towel, she stood firm, held my hand, and guided me to the finish line. Words cannot express my gratitude for such an amazing, inspiring, and dedicated advisor, mentor, and soon-to-be-colleague.

I am also humbled to have a dissertation committee that illustrated their commitment to my work since the very beginning. Dr. Esther Kim Lee, for believing that I, too, could be a scholar. Dr. James Harding, for the inspiring conversations and cups of coffee – I will always cherish those moments. Dr. Sheri L. Parks, for pushing me to be a better scholar – the conversations we had during summer 2017 stayed with me – they kept me going. And Dr. Julius B. Fleming, for checking-in on me and for talking me off the ledge (more than once)!

I would like to thank the archivists at the Kitchen Prayers Peace archive housed in the Labadie Collection in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. I would also like to thank the archivists at the Rockefeller Archive Center.

I would like to express sincere gratitude to everyone that granted me personal interviews. Special thanks are owed to Anitra Dickerson-Duncan, Dr. Freda Scott Giles, Kathy Perkins, Breena Clarke, Vera Katz, and Dr. Judith Stephen-Lorenz. In addition to granting me interviews, they each shared with me materials from their personal archives and pointed me in directions that made this project grow into a dissertation. Dr. Giles, Dr. Stephens Lorenz, and Professor Perkins sent me notes of encouragement every so often and told me how important this work was as I was honoring their colleague and their friend. I hope I’ve made them proud.

To Dr. Paul “Papa J” Bryant-Jackson. Since attending graduate school at Miami University, you’ve continuously supported me. I am blessed to have such a wonderful professional mentor and life coach. And to Dr. Jim Engstrom, thank you for accepting me into the family and allowing me to lean on Papa J.

My #BlackJoyGroup, many of whom also served as writing partners: Tatiana Benjamin, Robert Jiles, Donelle Boose, Harry White, Nana Brantuo, Timea Webster, Leticia Ridley, Donte McGuire, Terri McGuire, Perre Shelton, Tia Cherie. The family I chose! Through the arguments and critical debates, we all matured. And especially to Tatiana, Timea,

Nana, and Robert, my friends who provided space for me to cry in front of them and who confirmed in their own distinct ways that I was intelligent, even when I didn't believe it.

My besties and confidants: Wayne "Weezy" Cooper and Chase Sullivan. These *brothas* kept me sane on Friday nights (and some Saturdays, lol!). And my Denver besties: Shiraya Soto and Nicola Williams. These *sistahs* always made space for me. The Denver trips were life-saving and life-confirming. I thank all of my besties for making me laugh and for reminding me that "best friends" don't care whether you have a PhD or not – they love you no matter what!

My "lil bro" and best buddy: Avery Collins, for reminding me that I made a difference in the lives of my students. And for making a difference in my life!

To my former students, performers, and mentees, especially Tyasia Velines, Robert Gandy, Vaughn Midder, Chris Lane, Sisi Reid, James Nelson, Jamaal McCray, Moriamo Akibu, and Tray Jones. Thank you for trusting me as your teacher, director, and mentor.

My best friend since 9<sup>th</sup> grade, Markeyath Garrett. Thank you for the random telephone calls and for always showing up. You are truly family!

My creative partner/work-wife and best friend in the arts: M.K. Abadoo. For all that you do and all that you say!

My scholar-Brothers: Dr. Levar Smith, for always keeping me focused and grounded since our days at the lodge, B-Dubs, and the library while at Miami University. Dr. Isaiah Wooden, for keeping it real – and telling me to step away when necessary. Le'Mil Eiland, I am especially grateful for the telephone calls whether 3am, 6am, or 10pm – you always answered, listened, assessed, and provided great feedback. And Dr. Deron Williams, for your messages of encouragement and for being a virtual writing buddy.

Mentors: Professor Felicia Seamon, Dr. Cheryl Johnson, Professor Alvin Mayes, Professor Scot Reese, Dr. Sandra G. Shannon, Dr. La Donna Forsgren, and Dr. Baron Kelly. Thank you being exemplars of the kind of teachers, scholars, and mentors I aspire to emulate.

Friends and Colleagues in the trenches: Dr. Kristyl Tift and soon-to-be Dr. Jonnetta Woodard. It's was rough, but we did it.

I am grateful for wonderful colleagues in the School of Theatre, Dance, and Performance Studies at the University of Maryland. Special thanks are owed to Caroline Clay, Jeff Kaplan, Allan Davis, Adam Sheaffer, Sara Thompson, Kate Spanos, Leticia Ridley, and Mustapha Braimah. I would also like to thank the faculty of TDPS, especially Professor Leigh Wilson Smiley, Professor Jennifer Barclay, Dr. Laurie Frederik, Dr. Frank Hildy, Dr. Caitlin Marshall. I also owe special thanks to the staff of TDPS, especially Camilla Schlegel, Crystal Gaston, Sandra Jackson, Susan Miller, and Renee Nyack.

I am also thankful for colleagues across the UMD campus especially Dina Shafey Scott, Mark Lockwood, Wendy Laybourn, Kevin Winstead, Kuru Belay, Stephanie Akoumany,

Bimbola Akinbola, Justin Sprague, Donnesha Blake, Tangere Hoagland, Brienne Amaris, and Hazim Abdullah.

To My Long family, White Family, and Harper family, for whom may have never understood the journey, but always supported me on it. With special thanks to my Dad who finally shared with me his wish for my future: “Khalid, I want you to be all that I am not. And do all that I didn’t. And go everywhere that I couldn’t.” And to my grandmother, Myra “Nonnie” White—my favorite girl in the world. Our daily phone calls kept me sane. You steadily reminded me that the future was mine! I love you.

Finally, to myself: For the courage! For finding the strength. And for being committed! And for the days when things were really bad, and I thought it was time to give up (in more ways than one), you put on the head phones, cranked up the music, and allowed positive thoughts to pull you back in.

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## Introduction

I first heard the name Glenda Dickerson while in graduate school at Miami University Oxford, Ohio. I was granted the opportunity to complete a creative thesis – a dual project comprised of a full-length scholarly thesis accompanied with directing a mainstage production. After much discussion and deliberation, I selected Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta* as the play I would direct and write about for my thesis. In fact, it was during the researching and writing of my master’s thesis, “Pearl Cleage’s *A Song for Coretta*: Cultural Performativity as Historiographical Documentation,” that I learned there was such a thing known as Black feminist and womanist theatre. I had heard of feminism and was slightly familiar with womanism, but I was completely unaware that Black women theatre artists – particularly those who emerged during the Black renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s – were radically influential in the burgeoning of the contemporary Black feminist movement altogether. Artists such as Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, Adrienne Kennedy, Ntozake shange, and Alexis De Veaux, among others, wrote plays that asked spectators to reconsider static notions of Blackness, gender, sexuality, and other cultural markers of identity. And while many of these artists did not employ the term feminism as a phrase to identify their plays, their works, nonetheless, forced both audiences and critics to (re)consider the interconnecting forces of Black women’s identities.

My thesis advisor, Professor Paul Bryant-Jackson, instructed that I read an essay written by theatre scholar Freda Scott Giles: “In Their Own Words: Pearl Cleage and Glenda Dickerson Define Womanist Drama.” This essay was most enlightening. Indeed, Giles’ important essay helped to further my understanding of Black feminism and

womanism as theoretical paradigms activated in theatre and performance. Additionally, I was introduced to Glenda Dickerson. I immediately became enamored with her. I was in awe of her accomplishments and—I wanted to know more about her. A host of questions arose: What else has she done? Is she still creating works? Why haven't I heard of her? The latter question led me to ponder: why isn't she included in the foremost scholarly discourses pertaining to American theatre, Black theatre, women in theatre, feminist theatre?

A few months prior to entering the doctoral program in theatre and performance studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, Glenda Dickerson made her transition to take her place among the ancestors. Although it was later learned that Dickerson was indeed suffering from a terminal prognosis, her death was, nevertheless, a shock to the intertwining worlds of academia and theatre. In the wake of Dickerson's death, I found myself still wanting answers to my questions. Yet, at this time I had a new question arise: who would remember her?

Glenda Dickerson, whose career spans a little over forty years, held many roles within the field of American theatre: playwright, director, folklorist, performer, choreographer, adapter/conceiver, and educator. Dickerson was the second African American woman to direct on Broadway<sup>1</sup> with the 1980 production, *Reggae, a Musical Revelation*.<sup>2</sup> She also directed for prominent theatres throughout the country, including the Negro Ensemble Company, the New Federal Theatre, the Seattle Repertory Theatre,

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<sup>1</sup> The first African American woman to direct on Broadway was Vinnette Carroll with the 1971 production of *Don't Bother Me, I Can't Cope*. The production also marked Carroll as the first Black woman to be nominated for a Tony Award as best director.

<sup>2</sup> *Reggae* opened at the Biltmore Theatre on March 11, 1980. With concept and production by Michael Butler, story by Kendrew Lascelles, book by Melvin Van Peebles, and starring Sheryl Lee Ralph and Philip Michael Thomas, *Reggae* is a mix between a love story and an exploration of Rastafarianism. *Reggae* ran for a total of twenty-one performances, closing April 13, 1980.

the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, Crossroads Theatre Company, and the St. Louis Black Repertory Company. In doing so, Dickerson worked with many well-known performers, including Lynn Whitfield, Lynda Gravatt, Robert Townsend, Angela Basset, and Debbie Allen. After a successful run in commercial theatre, Glenda Dickerson chose to place her efforts in developing works more intended for academic and community-oriented theatre. Dickerson's career in theatre was quite distinctive.

As a Black feminist theatre artist, Dickerson's dramatic works challenged the realist model for drama and centered the Black female voice. Accordingly, Dickerson's creative works were concerned with recovering the lost or silenced voice of Black women. Dickerson was not only concerned with shifting the subject of theatre by bringing Black women in from the margins to the center, but she was equally concerned with discovering the methods in which to forge new aesthetic and pedagogical ground. As Freda Scott Giles notes, "Though her university and professional work often called for her to direct realistic plays, Dickerson chafed under the restraint of realism. As she experimented with forms to reflect her ideas, she steadily built a body of work that tended toward the stylized and expressionistic" (135). Dickerson was committed to her task, to quote literary feminist scholar Patricia Meyer Spacks: "the task not only of enforcing new ways of seeing, but also of discovering new ways of saying" ("The Difference it Makes" 16). Although Spacks was not addressing Dickerson nor her work, I find her words to be quite apropos to frame Dickerson's career in the theatre. Accordingly, Dickerson spent much of her lengthy career endeavoring to develop an aesthetic for a type of theatre that was not only Black, but most importantly woman-centered.

Dickerson's dramatic works—from her miracle plays to her street theater to her performance dialogues—uses material from the real world to create a mythopoetic realm; a theatre that embodies history, culture, symbols, dreams, and inspiration (“Cult” 111). Dickerson's plays combine Greek mythology, African tales, and African American folklore further articulated through oral narratives, choreographed movements, spirituals, ensemble compositions, and cultural artifacts. Intrinsically, Dickerson's theatre has been described as being closely akin to Ntozake shange's choreopoem.<sup>3</sup> However, according to Taquiena Boston and Vera J. Katz, Dickerson was doing this stylistically devised work prior to Shange: “Drawing on her intense training in choral and oral interpretation, which she learned from Owen Dodson at Howard University, and combining this with her highly developed sense of movement, Dickerson was perfecting the “choreopoem” before the term was coined for the famed production *for colored girls*. . . by Ntozake shange” (“Witnesses to a Possibility” 22). However, unlike her contemporary Shange, Dickerson never saw her work as playwright/conceiver enter mainstream-commercial theatre. Though Dickerson was well-respected within the commercial theatre arena, particularly as she was a noteworthy figure during the development of Black theatre from the 1960s throughout the 1980s, she opted to create theatre for academically inclined institutions, as well as community spaces.

Despite the ways in which Glenda Dickerson challenged racial and gendered boundaries within both professional and academic theatre, and with her pioneering of contemporary Black theatre as well as a Black feminist theatre, Dickerson's legacy is still largely unknown, and, most strikingly, severely under-documented within the scholarly

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<sup>3</sup> See Karen Cronacher's "Unmasking the Minstrel Mask's Black Magic in Ntozake shange's "spell #7 and Giles' "Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu: Combining Feminist Discourse/Pedagogy/Theatre.

histories of theatre and performance. For instance, when Dickerson is referenced in studies that address African American theatre or Black women in theatre such as Errol Hill and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre* or Anthony Hill and Douglas Q. Barnett's *Historical Dictionary of African American Theatre*, it is usually a small survey of her work as a director and/or playwright/conceiver. Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow's reference book, *American Women Directors of the Twentieth Century*, does provide a more comprehensive survey of Dickerson's work in the theatre that is premised on interviews Fliotsos conducted with Dickerson. More theoretically-inclined examinations that draw attention to Dickerson are mostly examinations of her only published play, *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* (1993), in which she co-wrote with Breena Clarke. These works include Kim Euell's essay "Signifyin(g) Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons," Mary F. Brewer's *Race and Gender in Contemporary Women's Theatre*, and Lisa M. Anderson's *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*. African American theatre historian Freda Scott Giles' work provides a more in-depth examination of Dickerson's oeuvre within the context of Black feminist-womanist theatre. In the first essay, "In Their Own Words: Pearl Cleage and Glenda Dickerson Define Womanist Drama," Giles asserts that Glenda Dickerson and Pearl Cleage—though different in their employment of dramatic structure and theatrical styles—have both contributed to the making and establishing of womanist dramas. In her second essay, "Glenda Dickerson's *Nu Shu*: Combining Feminist Discourse/Pedagogy/Theatre," Giles offers a trajectory of Dickerson's career, focusing heavily on Dickerson's comingling of feminist thought with innovative theatrical styles to create a theatre of pedagogy. Additionally, Giles highlights some of Dickerson's final works before her untimely

death, including the *Kitchen Prayer Series* and *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*. Each of these unpublished works are examined within this study. Giles contends that “Dickerson’s forty years of theatrical experience are more than ripe for a dissertation or book length study” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 146). It is Giles’ note, to a certain extent, that steered me to this dissertation project. Accordingly, my dissertation offers both a genealogy of Dickerson’s life in the theatre and close-readings of some of her final creative works. To that end, my study aims to place Glenda Dickerson within the annals of American, African American, and feminist/womanist theatre and performance.

### **Research Questions**

This dissertation, “Staging Black Women’s Histories: Recovery and Recuperation in the Theatre of Glenda Dickerson,” is a critical study of artisan and pedagogue Glenda Dickerson. The first full-length study of this Black feminist theatre pioneer, my dissertation project aims to lay the groundwork for future scholarly examinations of Dickerson and her oeuvre. Although this dissertation will shed light on her directing career, scholarship, and pedagogical approaches, the following chapters will also offer critical analyses of several of her unpublished, contemporary dramatic works. By highlighting major themes found within these works and providing both a historical and theoretical study of her writing, devising, and staged performances, this dissertation aims to situate Dickerson as a forerunner of contemporary Black theatre as well as contemporary feminist theatre.

Whereas this dissertation addresses the life of Glenda Dickerson, this project seeks to answer the questions: How and where is Glenda Dickerson situated within the cultural and historical genealogy of African American and Black feminist performance?

What were her contributions to African American theatre and Black feminist performance? In answering these questions, I will provide a genealogy of Dickerson's career, highlighting some of the historical and socio-cultural influences that shaped her life and work in the theatre. Theatre scholar Margaret B. Wilkerson states that "the lives of women of color must be pitched against the social history of their times . . . because they are by definition and legacy political entities" ("Excavating our History" 74-75). Accordingly, this project will consider the history and development of African American theatre and performance by expanding the documentation and contextualization of a contemporary Black women artist *as well as* a Black feminist and womanist theatre artist. Dickerson's theatrical career—from the 1960s up until her death in 2012—is comprised of shifts, aesthetic cultivations, and liberatory practices that allowed her to pull away from conventional theatre, as well as subvert dominant forms and methods for creating theatre and performance. Thus, I recognize how documenting her story can open up the gates to bring forth other forgotten, lost, or silenced Black women in theatre and performance.

In approaching Dickerson and her work as the product/effort/creations of a multifaceted theatre artist, I aim to highlight Dickerson's artistic and scholarly contributions to the intersecting roots of Black theatre, Black feminist-womanist theatre, community theatre, and academic theatre. To that end, my project is twofold: first, this project is about excavating Glenda Dickerson as a pioneer of Black feminist theatre, and secondly reviving her works so that they may be included within the canon of

contemporary Black feminist drama.<sup>4</sup> Without a doubt, I am interested in recuperating Glenda Dickerson and reviving her works from the hidden cracks of (theatre) history.

The term “revive” carries over into Dickerson’s creative works. That leads one to ask: How does Glenda Dickerson revive women’s histories, memories, and narratives through performance? In answering this question my study illustrates the ways in which Dickerson revives the narratives of women that were, in the words of novelist Toni Morrison, “disremembered and unaccounted for” (*Beloved* 324) through acts of remembering (to conjure their names), recovering (to excavate their histories), and recuperating (to actively place them within the archive). What connects each of the four plays I examine in this dissertation is Dickerson’s commitment to staging women, both real and imagined, who are bound by history: either as women who’ve been impacted by historical events, women who’ve made significant impacts on history, or women who have been silenced by and within traditional modes of historiography. As such, this dissertation is largely invested in exploring how contemporary Black women playwrights, through my focus on Glenda Dickerson, use the stage as a space to recover and recuperate Black women’s histories.

In recuperating Glenda Dickerson and reviving her works, I am reminded of a question posed by editors Jayna Brown and Tavia Nyong’o in the introduction to the special edition of *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory*, entitled “Recall and Response: Black Women Performers & the Mapping of Memory.” Brown

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<sup>4</sup> I borrow the term “excavate” from Margaret B. Wilkerson’s essay, *Excavating Our History: The Importance of Biographies of Women of Color*. Wilkerson argues that critical biographies are crucial to understanding history and the development of cultural institutions such as theatre. My use of the term “revive” is informed by Gayle Wald’s where she states “to revive has specific resonance for subjugated populations, for whom bearing witness can be a crucial act of survival and symbolic (or cultural) reproduction. With its basis in the Latin *vivere*, to revive additionally indicates the restoration of life and the renewal of well-being.” (“Reviving Rosetta Tharpe” 94).

and Nyong'o ask: "Can we remember people and performances without trying to reconstruct whole, stable figures?" (4). Whereas my project is not concerned with reconstructing Dickerson as a whole, stable figure, I am, however, invested in illuminating how Dickerson, who was an active agent that intervened in dominant discourses surrounding feminist theatre and performance (read: white women scholars and practitioners), also made an intervention into the foremost masculinist ways of creating and staging works about women of color, thus concretizing a Black feminist/womanist theatre and, subsequently, modeling a Black feminist theatre theory through her praxis. In the next section I will discuss Glenda Dickerson's Black feminist intervention.

### **Feminist Theatre Theory**

Dickerson's creative works are distinctly feminist. Freda Scott Giles notes that Dickerson's works "follow the usual feminist precepts of rejecting linear narrative and the genre of realism as constructions that have failed to provide the open space needed for a multidimensional, comprehensive feminist discourse. In every work, Woman is in the subject position, never in the peripheral, object position" (Glenda Dickerson's *Nu Shu* 132-133). Seen in this light, Dickerson's theatre most certainly accompanies other women playwrights whose work "reshaped the modern dramatic/theatrical canon, and signaled its difference from mainstream (male) theatre" (Aston 57). In other words, Dickerson's theatre animates some of the principles of feminist theatre theory.

Feminist theatre theory emerged as both an analytical tool as well as a methodology through which to frame creative works. In fact, feminism has been one of the foremost theoretical apparatuses to shape the field of theatre especially as it has called

our attention to the dynamics of gender and sexuality (Fortier 107-108). Some of the foundational texts to assist in establishing feminism as an area of study include Dinah Louise Leavitt's *Feminist Theatre Group* (1980), Helen Krich Chinoy and Linda Walsh Jenkins' first edition of *Women in American Theatre* (1981) and Helene Keyssar's *Feminist Theatre* (1984). Though making an impact on the field of theatre studies, however, these works focused mainly on playwrights and theatre practitioners that emerged during the 1970s. Scholar of feminist theatre studies Elaine Aston maintains that "Studies of this kind were instrumental in making feminist and/or women's theatre work visible but, to develop this, what was needed [...] was a more fully rehearsed critical response critical frameworks appropriate for feminist analysis and 'looking' ("Foreword, *Feminism and Theatre ix-x*). The pioneers to heed this call includes theatre scholars and critics Sue-Ellen Case, Jill Dolan and Lynda Hart. In *Theatre & Feminism*, Kim Solga provides a summary of the ground-breaking scholars whose critical works indelibly changed the field of theatre studies and theatre practice by forging a relationship between feminist theory and theatre/performance. Solga singles out the year 1988-89 as "a watershed for feminist performance theory and criticism" (*Theatre & Feminism* 16). The year witnessed the publishing of some of feminist theatre's major works: Sue-Ellen Case's *Feminism and Theatre*, Jill Dolan's *The Feminist Spectator*, and Lynda Hart's edited collection, *Making a Spectacle: Feminist Essays on Contemporary Women's Theatre*. Other voices who would go on to contribute to the development of a feminist theatre theory includes, among others, Peggy Phelan, Elin Diamond, Jeanie Forte, Vivian Patraka, Gayle Austin, Janelle Reinalt, Lizbeth Goodman, Elaine Aston, and Glenda Dickerson.

The scholars and critics, such as those mentioned above, who contributed to founding and shaping a feminist theatre theory are diverse in their ideas, approaches, and theoretical foregrounding. That said, there is no singular definition or description of feminist theatre theory to encapsulate such a wide-ranging array of positionings. What can be gleaned from a survey of some of the major texts that established feminist theatre theory, however, is that these scholars, critics, and practitioners were committed to deconstructing the landscape of male privilege where women are positioned on the margins or, in many cases, not included at all (Dolan *The Feminist Spectator* xiv). As Sue-Ellen Case frames it, they were committed to making a “connection between the social movement and the stage” (*Feminism and Theatre* 2). Early feminist theatre theory was premised on several phases or steps. Inspired by Sue-Ellen Case’s *Feminism and Theatre*, Gayle Austin lays out the steps in her book *Feminist Theories for Dramatic Criticism*:

1. Working within the canon: examining images of women;
2. Expanding the canon: focusing on women writers;
3. Exploding the canon: questioning underlying assumptions of an entire field of study, including canon formation. (16-17)

Some scholars, such as Case, worked through each step. For instance, Case thought it necessary to re-read classic texts such as Greek dramas and Shakespeare to investigate how women were constructed within canonical texts. Case also embarked on the second step as she aimed to recuperate lost and understudied women playwrights such as Hrotsvit von Gandersheim (935 AD-1002) and Aphra Behn (1640-1689). Case writes about the first two steps in *Feminism and Theatre* asserting that they

utilised feminist theory and methodology to discover and describe the relationship between women and the history of the theatrical enterprise. The aim has been to illustrate the way feminist principles may be used to

analyse historical figures. As we have seen, some of the women active before the feminist movement showed a concern for women's oppression and rights and helped to pave the way for the exploration of women's issues in performance. (62)

In speaking about the third step, Case writes that the objectives were to "identify certain relationships between feminist political positions and actual plays and practices of the contemporary theatre. . ." (63). Case goes on to identify three central feminist political positions that she and other feminist theatre scholars, namely Jill Dolan, employ as frameworks: liberal/bourgeois feminism, radical/cultural feminism, and material feminism. Elaine Aston summarizes each position in her book *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre*:

bourgeois or liberal feminism proposes the amelioration of women's position in society without any radical change to its political, economic, or social structures, e.g. through legislative reform. Radical feminism locates the oppression of women in the patriarchal domination of women by men, and advocates the abolition of the man-made structures which reinforce gender-based equality. Materialist feminism . . . critiques the historical and material conditions of class, race, and gender oppression, and demands the radical transformation of social structures. (9)

In the early stage of researching this dissertation, I upheld the notion that Dickerson's plays were conceived through the framework of radical/cultural feminism. I was influenced by Jill Dolan's definition where she states, "Cultural feminism proposed instead a fundamental change in the nature of universality by suggesting that female gender values take place of the generic male . . . seek[ing] to reverse the gender hierarchy by theorizing female values as superior to male values" (6). I was eager to classify Dickerson's works within the framework of cultural feminism due to a statement she made in where she expressed being a "woman not defined by or through men" ("Cult" 116). But as Dolan warns, cultural feminism does not encompass for the full figuration of

women theatre artists that were not so much concerned with the overthrow of men as they were with staging fully-developed, complex women characters—characters who were empowered and gained agency by dramatizing their histories, beliefs, and experiences on the stage. More precisely, Dickerson’s works, which I now contend are animated through a materialist feminist framework, revisits and revises Black women as historical subjects whose relation to prevailing social structures is also influenced by race, class, and sexual identification” (Dolan 10).

Even though feminist theatre theory advanced theatre studies and practice, it is extremely important to point out that most of the earlier scholars and critics to develop a feminist theatre theory were predominantly white women who were concerned with gender as a determining factor for developing a feminist theatre theory. And while theatre scholar Sandra L. Richards pressed the issue that it was “time that white women and men began to participate in the project of bringing more black women’s writing and theatre work to critical attention,” (“Women, Theatre, and Social Action”)<sup>5</sup> their concerted efforts still marginalized the lived experiences of Black women and other women of color. In other words, within early theoretical studies of feminist theatre, the inclusion of women of color seemed to be an afterthought, footnote or addendum within studies that focused on women theatre artists, and/or feminist theatre and performance.

For example, in *Feminism and Theatre* (1988), Case discloses that her inclusion of “women of colour” is limited, as she expresses that “[t]he white author cannot write from the experience of racial oppression, or from the perspective of the ethnic

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<sup>5</sup> Sandra L. Richards made this statement in a paper she delivered at the ‘Breaking the Surface’ conference/festival held in Calgary, November 13-17, 1991. I learned of Richards’ paper, and subsequently her quote, from Lizbeth Goodman’s book *Contemporary Feminist Theatre: To Each Her Own*.

community, and must thus omit a sense of the internal composition of such a community or its interface with the white dominant culture” (95). Case goes on to assert that though she recognizes her stand-alone treatment of Black and Chicana women (her study focuses on these two groups) may perhaps attest to the “ghettoised” treatment they typically endure, “women of colour have identified their position as a discrete issue within feminism, challenging the presumed homogeneity of voice and vision within the [feminist] movement” (96). Lizbeth Goodman’s *Contemporary Feminist Theatre* (1993) and Elaine Aston’s *An Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* (1995) follow in the footsteps of Case, acknowledging that to not include women of color would only “constitute a regressive return to a white, racist agenda of feminist theory and practice, and ignore a new direction in feminist theatre studies” (Aston 80). Thus, Goodman’s and Aston’s monographs do provide a chapter on Black British women in theatre; albeit, leaving a gap in the examination of Black feminist theatre in a U.S. context. It is here where I contend that Glenda Dickerson made a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre theory as she was one of the earliest voices to intercede and ensure that women of color had a seat at the table. In the next section I will discuss how Dickerson made a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre theory. In doing so, I will first provide an overview of the development of Black feminist theory.

### **Glenda Dickerson’s Black Feminist Intervention**

I make the claim that Dickerson made a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre theory because of her critical writings that illustrates her merging of Black feminist thought with her work and ideas as a theatre practitioner. While her body of essays are small, they are, nonetheless, impactful as she forced white feminist theatre

theorists and practitioners to be cognizant of race and class as well as gender.<sup>6</sup> In order to establish how Dickerson made a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre theory, I will first discuss Black feminist theory and Black feminist literary criticism which is commonly employed as a method of analysis to engage Black women's creative works including drama and performance. As scholar of theatre and Black feminist studies Lisa M. Anderson contends, the "strong development of black feminist theory and the emergence of womanist theory have enabled the development of a black feminist aesthetic" (*Black Feminism* 13).

Black feminist theory—as a radical movement, a theoretical paradigm, a political position or identity—emerged during the 1970s in response to the Women's Movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the 1960/70s Black Liberation Movement. The Women's Movement, also referred to as the Feminist Movement, was launched by white women who were seeking gender equality. However, Black women and other women of color, did not feel included in the Women's Movement as they argued the Women's movement catered to middle-class, white women who hadn't taken into consideration the dynamics of race and class. Likewise, the Black Liberation Movement opposed white oppression by advocating for Black collective pride and uplift, but they were accused of being misogynist because of their patriarchal treatment of Black women. In short, the concerns of Black women were ignored, and thus Black women were rendered invisible within both movements.

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<sup>6</sup> Dickerson's writings, which I refer to throughout the dissertation, includes: "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre," "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say "NO!,"" Re/membering Aunt Jemima: Rescuing the Triune Voice," "Rode a Railroad that Had No Track," and "Festivities and Jubilations on the Graves of the Dead: Sanctifying Sullied Space."

One of the earliest texts to foreground Black feminist theory and criticism was *The Black Woman: An Anthology*. Published in 1970 and edited by scholar, activist, documentary filmmaker, and professor Toni Cade Bambara, the anthology featured writings by a group of Black women writers such as Alice Walker and Audre Lorde. Lamenting that these Black women writers, activists, artists, scholars were “involved in a struggle for liberation” from “racism” and “male chauvinism,” Bambara highlights in the preface some of the activities that these Black feminist cultural workers were initiating:

Throughout the country in recent years, Black women have been forming work-study groups, discussion clubs, cooperative nurseries, cooperative businesses, consumer education groups, women’s workshops on the campuses, women’s caucuses within existing organizations, Afro-American women’s magazines. From time to time they have organized seminars on the Role of the Black Woman, conferences on the Crisis Facing the Black Woman, have provided tapes on the Attitude of European Men Toward Black Women, working papers on the Position of the Black Woman in America; they have begun corresponding with sisters in Vietnam, Guatemala, Algeria, Ghana on the Liberation Struggle and the Woman, formed alliances on a Third World Women plank. (9-10).

A major point within Bambara’s preface is the efforts of early Black feminists to generate a globally-inclusive feminist movement. Bambara’s point substantiates the fact that Black feminists have always been cognizant that their struggles resemble the struggles of women worldwide.

Another major text that shaped and concretized Black feminist theory was the Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement.” Written in 1977, the statement articulates the “historical reality of Afro-American women’s continuous life-and-death struggle for survival and liberation” as it critiqued “Black women’s extremely negative relationship to the American political system (a system of white male rule) has always been determined by our membership in two oppressed racial and sexual castes.

(“A Black Feminist Statement” 13-14). It was this statement that names Black feminism as “the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face” (“A Black Feminist Statement” 13). The principal strength of the text was its focus on the overlapping forms of oppression Black women face that find its roots in patriarchy and racism: “We are actively committed to struggling against racial, sexual, heterosexual, and class oppression, and see as our particular task the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking. The synthesis of these oppressions creates the conditions of our lives” (13). Legal scholar and critical race theorist Kimberlé Crenshaw in her essay, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” would later coin the term “intersectionality” as an analytic to both expand and solidify the notion that Black women’s subjectivities are established (and oppressed) through overlapping markers of identity, namely race, gender, class, and sexuality. Sociologist and Black feminist studies scholar Patricia Hill Collins writes about the importance of “intersectionality” within the context of Black feminist studies in her book, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*. Collins writes, “Black feminist thought fosters a fundamental paradigmatic shift in how we think about oppression. By embracing a paradigm of race, class, and gender as interlocking systems of oppression, Black feminist thought reconceptualizes the social relations of domination and resistance” (222). Combahee River Collective’s “A Black Feminist Statement” was taken up as a manifesto that in turn launched Black feminism as an area of studies within academia. Scholars and critics such as Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks,

Hazel Carby, Bell Scott, Barbara Christian, and Barbara Smith, among others, were some of the leading influential voices to shape Black feminist studies with their works.

Black feminist scholars Barbara Smith, one of the principal authors to write “A Black Feminist Statement,” and Barbara Christian were among Black feminist scholars and critics who called for a new way, that is a Black feminist approach, to nuance Black women’s cultural productions (i.e., fiction, poetry, novels, etc.), precisely by recognizing the works created by black women, and challenging the ways in which their works were perceived by readers, seen by spectators, and analyzed by critics and scholars (Bobo xv). First published in 1977, Barbara Smith declares in her essay, “Towards a Black Feminist Criticism,” “There is no political presence that demands a minimal level of consciousness and respect from those who write or talk about our lives. Finally, there is not a developed body of black feminist political theory whose assumptions could be used in the study of Black women’s art” (9). Smith goes on to argue that Black women’s works were studied through a general lens of Black studies, ultimately disregarding the repercussions of gender politics. Additionally, Smith argued that white critics, particularly white women, were “ill-equipped to deal with the subtleties of racial politics” (9). As a result of her critique, Smith called for a Black feminist approach to Black women’s cultural production that “embodies the realization that the politics of sex as well as the politics of race and class are crucially interlocking factors” (9). Likewise, Barbara Christian offers a similar critique in her essay, “The Race for Theory.” Written in 1987, Christian suggests that “we read the works of our writers in our various ways and remain open to the intricacies of the intersection of language, class, race, and gender in the literature” (53). Black feminist and cultural studies scholar Sheri L. Parks, too, recognizes the

multidimensionality within Black women's literary and artistic works. Parks maintains that "A common theme in the writings of black women and [. . .] in black feminist criticism is that of cultural duality and double racial consciousness" ("In My Mother's House" 202). To Anderson's earlier point, it was Black feminist theory and literary criticism that helped to propel a language that, in turn, formulated a method to read and analyze Black feminist aesthetics within a plethora of literary and artistic mediums and genres.

Glenda Dickerson's critical writings are predicated on Black feminist theory and literary criticism thereby evoking the names of scholars from early "race women"<sup>7</sup> such as Sojourner Truth, Maria Stewart, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, and Zora Neale Hurston to more contemporary writers and scholars such as Lucille Clifton, Mary Helen Washington, and bell hooks. Moreover, Dickerson's writings serve a dual role. First, they offer an entryway into her life as well as her creative process as a Black feminist artist. Secondly, they detail her subjective experiences as a Black woman within the professional world of theatre and academia. Intrinsicly, Dickerson's writings have served as primary sources throughout this dissertation—especially chapter one—as they've helped me to trace and contextualize significant moments throughout her theatrical career. For instance, during the 1987 pre-conference of the Women and Theatre Program, a focus group of the Association for Theatre in Higher Education, Glenda Dickerson delivered her groundbreaking speech, "The Cult of True Womanhood: Toward

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<sup>7</sup> In her book, "Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women," Black feminist studies scholar Brittney C. Cooper defines the phrase "race women" as "the first Black women intellectuals [and activist]. As they entered into public racial leadership roles beyond the church in the decades after reconstruction, they explicitly fashioned for themselves a public duty to serve their people through the diligent and careful intellectual work and attention to proving the intellectual character of the race" (11).

a Womanist Attitude in African-American Theatre,” which was later published in *Theatre Journal* in 1988 and in 1990 re-published in *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*, edited by Sue Ellen-Case. Part-autobiographical, part-manifesto, Dickerson provides a Black feminist voice both on and within the field of theatre and performance, while simultaneously theorizing a Black woman’s subjectivity. Describing her process of going from a theatre artist, to a Black feminist theatre artist, to a womanist PraiseSinger, Dickerson’s essay reveals her own personal views, shifts, and practices towards theatre. Additionally, the essay addressed how she aimed to resuscitate “the silenced voice of the woman.” Dickerson writes that the Black woman’s voice

has been silenced for centuries, breaking forth sporadically, choked, and gasping for air. It has been variously silenced by the obvious foot on the throat and the subtle whispering thought. It has been silenced as part and parcel of the corruption of the ancient matriarchy. The depiction and perception of African-American woman in this country through stereotypes has garbled her voice and distorted her image. (110).

Dickerson goes on to assert that Black women were denied access to the “Cult of True Womanhood,”<sup>8</sup> as they were “triple locked out: by class, by race, and history” (110). As such, Dickerson’s mission in the theatre was to resist stereotypes of Black women that were born out of “minstrel shows and plantation literature” (110). Dickerson writes, “My journey now leads me to redefine the nature of “true womanhood” (110). Accordingly, Dickerson made it her life’s work to reclaim the culture and history of Black folk, in particular Black women, through the use of African American folklore. Taking her cue from folklorist, anthropologist, and literary giant of the Harlem Renaissance Zora Neale

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<sup>8</sup> The Cult of True Womanhood, also known as the “cult of domesticity,” is a phrase used to denote 19<sup>th</sup> century white women’s belief that true womanhood was attained by upholding standards of piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity. For more on the “Cult of True Womanhood,” see Barbara Welters “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860.”

Hurston, a Black feminist in her own right, Dickerson regarded folklore as a method to connect the past with the present, to acknowledge the genealogy of cultural traditions and philosophies, and to preserve the histories of a people through storytelling. To that note, Dickerson maintained that folklore – especially for Black women – was to be used a “liberating, subversive weapon” (110). Precisely, by staging the folklore of Black women Dickerson revived the “silenced voice of the woman of color,” providing space for her own subjective words to be heard and counted for and to not depend on an often-distorted illustration.

A major moment in Dickerson’s essay, “Cult of True Womanhood,” is Dickerson’s discussion of “womanism.” Dickerson writes, “I went searching with Alice Walker for ‘our mothers’ gardens.’ That’s when I became a womanist. So, naturally I had to incorporate her salty definition. . .” (184). Dickerson goes on to quote Alice Walker’s definition of womanism:

Womanist: from woman, a Black feminist or feminist of color; from the Black folk expression, "you acting womanish." Want to know more than is considered "good for one." Responsible, in charge, serious. Also, a woman who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually. Appreciates and prefers women's company, women's culture, women's emotional flexibility and women's strength. Traditionally capable as in, "Mama, I'm walking to Canada and I'm taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me." Loves music, loves dance, loves the movies, loves the spirit, loves love and food and roundness, loves struggle, loves the folk, loves herself-regardless!

Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender.

(“Cult” 184)

In addition to writer Alice Walker, who is credited for popularizing the term “womanism” in her book, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: Womanist Prose*, womanism has been theorized and situated within the mainstream by several scholars and activists such as Nigerian literary scholar Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, scholar of

African American studies and literature Clenora Hudson-Weems, and Layli Phillips-Mapryan, editor of *The Womanist Reader*. Like Black feminism, womanism does not have a concrete definition—which is part of the nuance of womanism. That said, I turn to Phillips-Mapryan’s as she defines the core elements of womanism:

Womanism is a social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment/nature, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension. I take the perspective of womanism is not feminism. Its relationships to feminism (including Black feminism) are important, but its relationships to other critical theories and social-justice movements are equally important, despite being less frequently discussed or acknowledged. Unlike feminism, and despite its name, womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather, it elevates all sites and forms of oppression, whether they are based on social-address categories like gender, race, or class, to a level of equal concern and action. Womanism’s link to gender is the fact that the historically produced race/class/gender matrix that is Black womanhood serves as the origin point for a speaking position that freely and autonomously addresses any topic or problem. Because Black women experience sexism, and womanism is concerned with sexism, feminism is confluent with the expression of womanism, but feminism and womanism cannot be conflated, nor can it be said that womanism is a “version” of feminism. (xx-xxi).

There has been much debate about the relationship between Black feminism and womanism. Black feminist scholar Patricia Hill Collins asserts that “many African American women see little difference between the two since both support a common agenda of Black women’s self-definition and self-determination” (“What’s in a Name” 10). As Collins references in her essay, Black feminist studies scholar Barbara Omolade, too, has argued that “black feminism is sometimes referred to as womanism because both are concerned with struggles against sexism and racism by black women who are themselves part of the black community's efforts to achieve equity and liberty” (*The*

*Rising Song of African American Women* xx). One of the major principles of womanism that is apropos to Dickerson's theatre is the notion of being "Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. [...] Traditionally a universalist..." (Walker, *In Search of Mother's Garden* xi). Theatre scholar Freda Scott Giles writes about Dickerson's application of womanism within her works: "Some feminists have given the impression that much of the feminist movement is fixated on the victimization of women; womanism resists that notion. The big picture is liberty and justice for all. The goal of freeing society from racism, classism, and sexism is mutually exclusive" ("Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu" 141). As Black feminist/womanist works, Dickerson's plays illustrate her commitment to communities—that is, her commitment to the Black community as well as to a global community of women.

Black feminism, as well as womanism, takes on a globally-inclusive framework. Black feminist author and activist Audre Lorde is often referenced as a major voice that called for feminist-activists (regardless of gender identity) to overthrow the ideologies that have contributed to racist, classist, and sexist attitudes and practices both in the United States and abroad. In her seminal essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House," Lorde contends that feminist theory is not complete "without examining our many differences, and without a significant input from poor women, Black and Third World women, and lesbians" (111). Lorde's theoretical manifesto calls for a liberatory praxis that is unequivocally concerned with the absence of Black women, poor women, queer women, and third world women's experiences, among others, from larger feminist discourses. In fact, Dickerson takes a global perspective with her work particularly as she believed that oppression, particularly for women, was a

phenomenon experienced all around the world. She writes in her essay, “The Cult of True Womanhood”:

When you start reading ancient myths and womanist literature and traveling to countries where the people look like you, you gain a so-called global perspective. Not only is the language of oppression the same the world over; the anguish of women is echoed around the world and resonates from continent to continent. The torture of mothers who lose their daughters to rape, war, drugs, poverty; the suffering of women who are tortured and die in Latin American prisons; the untimely death of young women who are killed by drunk drivers or yuppie lovers in New York's Central Park and then twice victimized by the courts and press: these women are sisters in suffering, fixed on the fangs of the two-headed serpent. Their silenced voices, their stilled tongues are symbolized for me in the illegal banning of South Africa's Nomzamo Winnie Mandela, whom the people call "Mother of the Nation. (115)

Seen in this light, Dickerson’s artistic mantra mirrors Lorde’s manifesto as she strived to create a theatre that materializes what Lorde considers “difference” among women’s lived experiences.

Sue-Ellen Case praises Dickerson for her Black feminist intervention in her introduction to *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Case writes:

Dickerson amplifies the audacity of that voice and its strength within a critique of the form of the drama – its predilection for heroes – particularly heroes of a certain gender and class. From the pleasures of those audacious roots, Dickerson creates a theatre, as a director, and a theory of the theatre, as a feminist theorist. Dickerson’s move illustrates one way in which the social movement and the feminist theorist/theatre practitioner traverse a common terrain – the pleasure of a historical moment, a material condition moving with the gestures of the stage and the dynamics of performative forms. (4)

Interestingly, Case does not directly name race as a factor within Dickerson’s theoretical framework. Instead, she focuses on gender and class. However, by calling out the “historical moment, a material condition,” as a “common terrain” Dickerson negotiates,

Case is making the point that Dickerson's theory and her theatre are formulated through materialist feminism which aims to critique the "conditions of class, race, and gender oppression, and demands the radical transformation of social structures" (Aston 9). Additionally, Case makes an important observation here by calling attention to the fact Dickerson not only helped in shaping the language of feminist theatre theory, but simultaneously innovated the practice of feminist theatre making.

Another essay of Dickerson's that was published during the developing stages of feminist theatre theory is "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say "No!". Published in the anthology *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theatre as if Gender and Race Matter* edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clements, Dickerson discusses in this essay her conceiving and directing of Alexis De Veaux's *NO!* for the Women's One World Festival in 1981. Like her other essays, Dickerson simultaneously theorizes her own subjectivity while also theorizing her theatre making experience. Dickerson's writes that before she began to collaborate with De Veaux on creating and mounting *NO!*, she felt that her "voice was silent, stifled, enraged strangled" (157). It is important to make mention that immediately before partnering with De Veaux in developing *NO!*, Dickerson had just finished directing the Broadway production of *Reggae: A Musical Revelation* (1980). According to Dickerson, the experience was horrendous for she felt stifled by the patriarchal powers of commercial theatre. Because of artistic disagreements with the producers, Dickerson was fired a week before opening night ("Rumblings on 'Reggae' Set" 54). All that to say, it is more than likely that Dickerson was in a state of disillusionment after being released from *Reggae*, thus finding a sense of one's self with *NO!*. She writes:

How I longed not to have to explain myself. What would I not give to announce and not apologize. Where was the language that spoke of the kind of liberation I had in mind—away of living or operating that is not solely defined by what we are transgressing, resisting, or deconstructing? Perceiving one's self as seen by others leads to self-consciousness, not self-awareness. Where was the eye that turned inward and was pleased? How do we define ourselves when we are living someone else's vision, women loving on the edge of time? (157)

Dickerson declares, "When I directed *"NO!"* I found for myself bell hooks's "liberatory voice," that of the uppity Black woman" (161). In the following chapter I provide a more in-depth contextualization of Dickerson finding her liberatory voice by enacting elements of Black feminism to disrupt masculinist ways of making theatre.

The editors of the anthology, Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement, also praise Dickerson for her Black feminist intervention. In the introduction to their important book on feminist theatre directing, Donkin and Clement consider Dickerson a "godmother," noting that her "intellectual and artistic courage and generosity have given us permission to think past the limits of our own cultural identification as white women and to begin investigating the way Big Daddy crosses into communities of color" (5).<sup>9</sup> Donkin and Clement pay homage to Dickerson for exposing them to the intricacies of intersectionality. Donkin and Clement further concede that Dickerson "has been central to our growing understanding that women of color must be released from the necessity for explaining themselves and their work to the outside" (6). As such, the editors share that during the editing and publishing of *Upstaging Big Daddy*, Dickerson wrote a letter expressing her concerns about white women and the development of feminist theatre

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of "Big Daddy," according to the editors, is as a representation of one whose "presence is synonymous with control and power in ways that are profoundly linked to the social structures of marginalization and erasure" (3). In fact, the editors acknowledge that it was Dickerson who inspired the title of the anthology. In Dickerson's essay which is published in the anthology, she writes, "you can't wear your scarlet dress in Big Daddy's house" ("Wearing Red" 171).

theory and praxis. The editors did not publish the letter in its entirety. Instead, they published the following excerpt:

We women of color must take as our sole and essential audience our sisters. We must talk our lives to each other, to bare our souls to each other, because we are confronting hegemonic system of thought (not black men or white men or white women, but a system of thought) which has never seen us. We are in the process of birth; it is a birth of ourselves. I am sounding a battle to my sisters. I cannot turn over my shoulder to say 'Do you hear me?' (6).

Dickerson was adamant that white women do their own work when it came for them to learn about racial and class differences. Dickerson was not dismissive of white feminist's contributions to theatre (and feminist theory for that matter) but rather she insisted that they hold themselves accountable which in turn could be viewed as a commitment, to quote bell hooks, to "examine their sexist attitudes towards women unlike themselves" and be cognizant of "their impact of race and class privilege on their relationships to women outside of their race/class groups" ("Sisterhood: Political Solidarity" 47).

I recall meeting LeAnn Fields, Senior Executive Editor at the University of Michigan Press, at the 2014 American Society for Theatre Research (ASTR) Conference wherein she lamented about how early feminist theatre theory was deeply lacking a woman of color critique. Fields went on to share that she refused to publish Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement's *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as If Gender and Race Matter* if the editors did not include essays by women of color. Subsequently, the editors published Glenda Dickerson's "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say "NO!". What is most important about Field's anecdote is that she substantiates the fact that Glenda Dickerson was an essential feminist voice (of color) to

directly disrupt academic spaces where it was normal for white women to lead the charge in developing feminist theatre theory.

### **History as Collective/Connective Thread**

Glenda Dickerson believed that history was vital to establishing one's identity and to understanding how one may be positioned within the world. Accordingly, Dickerson was cognizant that her contemporary works followed in the tradition of socially active and politically aware theatre. In thinking of other contemporary Black women playwrights whose works intertwine women and history, I immediately summon the names of Pearl Cleage, Katori Hall, Lynn Nottage, Suzan Lori-Parks, and Dominique Morisseau. Like Dickerson, these Black women playwrights have written dramas that are "transformative historical revisions that serve to impact the collective African American national memory."<sup>10</sup> And in doing so, they have evidenced that performance can serve as a methodology for a revisionist history and a reconstructive, reparative historiography. Dickerson's aim, like the abovementioned playwrights, is not to simply restage history but rather to probe the significance of history across space and time. In other words, Dickerson asks her audience to consider how the past influences the present.

Indeed, the works of Glenda Dickerson have the potential to teach especially through their engagement with history. With each of her plays, Dickerson hoped that the lessons she imparted would serve as a catalyst to inspire social action among her audiences. Moreover, Dickerson depicts history through the lens of both ordinary people that have firsthand knowledge of the historical moment as well as noted historical figures

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<sup>10</sup> Joyce Scott Hope, "'Emancipated Century': Remapping History, Reclaiming Memory in August Wilson's Dramatic Landscapes of the 20th Century" in *August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on the Plays*. ed. Sandra G. Shannon. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016. Print

whose lives, too, have impacted by history. In doing so, Dickerson reminds us that everyone – from historical leaders to everyday folk – are bound by history.

In her book, *African American Theater: A Cultural Companion*, Glenda Dickerson made it clear that her goal was to highlight “ordinary people who tell extraordinary tales,” thus conjuring what she considers the “hidden gems” that “reflect the cultural stories” (4). Dickerson asserts that these hidden gems often “highlight a poignant part of the black experience that is not always revealed in the more popular works of other playwrights” (4). To that point, Dickerson credits Lorraine Hansberry, August Wilson, and Suzan-Lori Parks, as some of the leading playwrights who examine “the presence of the cultural past in today’s black theatrical landscape” (4). In naming Hansberry, Wilson, and Parks, among others, Dickerson pays homage to their dramaturgical strategies in which they cite history and culture within their works – sometimes as dramatic backdrops and other times as themes central to the plot.

Collectively, these playwrights, including Dickerson, have penned dramas that not only reflect a people’s every day, mundane experiences but their works just as well have queried the ways in which race and gender have played a part in how they participate in the world. Furthermore, while these playwrights have challenged narrowed and often distorted views of history, they’ve simultaneously advocated for the use of drama as a methodology in which to record history. For as Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally contend in the introduction to their critical anthology, *History and Memory in African American Culture*, “And yet the writing – narrating – of history has not been the exclusive concern of historians; it has been the province of artists and writers as well as other thoughtful and sometimes brilliant people” (6). With her oeuvre, Glenda Dickerson,

too, has made it her mission to fill in the fissures of history—especially when it comes to women—through dramatic interpretations.

In her essay, “Feminist Performance as Feminist Historiography,” theatre historian Charlotte Canning writes, “The performance of history is not usually held up as a legitimate mode of historiography. The profession that excluded woman also excluded myriad historiographical modes, generally narrowing them to the lecture, the article, and the book. Performance is often relegated to or categorized in another form—history plays, autobiography, or community theater, for example—and as such, understood to fill other functions than historiographical treatments of the past” (Canning 230). All of her plays examined in this dissertation, however, recontextualizes the role of women within history through performance. In other words, one recognizes how Dickerson stages Black women’s subjective experiences during certain historical moments, thus “demonstrate[ing] aspects of and ideas about history that are less possible in print” (Canning 230). Whereas her plays are “built around actual material circumstances from the past,” (228) moreover, Dickerson plays in, off, and with history.

Scholar Harry J. Elam, Jr. incisive essay on African American playwright’s use of history within their works, particularly the dramas of Suzan-Lori Parks, is quite edifying. Elam writes, “history as currently constituted reflects a bias that is not in her interest. And so functioning in her own self-interest, she makes some up, she acts her own history” (“Making History” 222). I find this statement to be reflective of how Dickerson employs history within her work. In that, Dickerson has embraced what Harry Elam calls an “imaginative archaeology,” “where one endeavors not only to uncover the past but also actually participates in its construction in the present” (220). If

“performance becomes a subversive strategy, acting as a form of historical resistance to the omission of the black [woman’s] presence” (Elam 220), then one surmises that Dickerson takes up the role of a theatrical and dramatic historian, conjuring up spirits and stories, to be documented through performance. Precisely, Dickerson digs through historical records and other sources to uncover and recover history which is significantly vital to a Black feminist agenda.

### **Research Methods**

As this project is a critical study on the life and works of Glenda Dickerson, the methods I will employ are mainly archival research, original interviews, and close-textual analysis of Dickerson’s unpublished contemporary works. Conducting archival research, I gathered any and everything that had the name Glenda Dickerson on it, from playbills and productions reviews, to newspaper and magazine articles. These materials assisted in my tracing a genealogy of Dickerson’s theatrical career. As such, much of this material was used to construct chapter 2.

In the fall of 2013, I received a box of materials from Dickerson’s daughter, Anitra Dickerson-Duncan. The box contained a copy of Glenda Dickerson’s curriculum vita and videos of performances from Dickerson’s *Kitchen Prayer Series*. Additionally, I spent significant time with the Kitchen Prayers Peace archive housed in the Labadie Collection in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. During my visits to the collection, I secured copies of the scripts for each play within the *Kitchen Prayer Series*. I want to take a moment to discuss the scripts and the recorded performances for it offers an understanding of how I approached my analysis of the *Kitchen Prayer Series*.

Upon retrieving scripts from the Kitchen Prayer Peace Archive housed in the Labadie Collection, Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, I learned that none of the scripts from the trilogy were in completed form or rather the scripts were in an unprocessed form. The scripts consisted of handwritten notes, newspaper clippings, xeroxed books and articles, pictures, email correspondences, and other contemporaneous sources with texts either highlighted or marked with someone's handwriting to indicate dialogue to be performed. The scripts were not easily readable, nor did they follow the recorded performances. As a result, the scripts and the recorded performances do not overlap evenly. In other words, when reading the fragmented scripts alongside a viewing of the recorded performances, there is no consistent flow of dialogue and action. What's most important: the scripts or the recorded performances? Do I analyze the recorded performances only? Or, do I attempt to only examine the scripts?

For the purposes of this dissertation, I decided to read both texts together. That is, for each performance within the *Kitchen Prayers* trilogy, I put both the scripts and the recorded performances in conversation to gain a fuller understanding of each performance. Reading the fragmented scripts allowed me to understand the dramaturgical process that went into developing the trilogy as well as assessing the written dialogue and the chosen narratives in which the performers enact. The recorded performances privilege the embodied meanings and actions of the script. Therefore, analyzing the scripts and the recorded performances together will provide for me a greater dramaturgical exploration of Dickerson's intentions with *The Kitchen Prayer Series*.

The process of organizing and transcribing the recorded performances and unprocessed scripts was quite laborious and required diligent effort on my part. As such,

there were several challenges. For instance, during my first trip to the Kitchen Prayers Peace Archive at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, I discovered that the scripts were not actually organized to reflect the course and flow of the performance. In that moment I learned that it would be required of me to photocopy the scripts and then take the painstaking efforts to put the script in order. I then discovered that photocopying the Kitchen Prayers Peace archive was prohibited. It is unclear of whether this policy was put in place by Glenda Dickerson or the archivists at the Labadie Special Collections. I was, however, allowed to take photos of each page within the archive. Although a strenuous task, I was fortunate to secure photos of each page of the three scripts.

Another challenge I encountered was with the videos of the performances. The quality of the videos was not consistent. While watching the videos, there were several times when the performers were inaudible because the sound muted or because the picture muted. And due to these blunders, I had to use the unprocessed script to speculate and transliterate what was being performed on the recorded performances.

In addition to archival research, I conducted a total of 22 interviews with Dickerson's family members, as well as artists, scholars, and educators that knew and/or worked with Glenda Dickerson. Most of the interviews were conducted over the telephone. Several interviews were conducted in-person and required me to travel to New York, New Jersey, and North Carolina. The interviews I conducted were insightful, and they helped me to understand Glenda Dickerson the artist and the educator. Even more emphatically, the interviews contextualized for me Glenda Dickerson the person. Among those I interviewed were Glenda Dickerson's father, brother, and daughter.

Starting interviews in fall of 2013, my first set of interviews conducted were with Dickerson's family. I was fortunate that to learn that Dickerson's father, Colonel (Ret.) Harvey Dickerson, Jr. and brother, Harvey Dickerson, III, both reside in the Maryland area and therefore I was able to schedule in-person interviews. It was later suggested that I conduct a telephone interview with Dickerson's father as the family were concerned about his health at the time. I did, however, meet with Dickerson's brother on the campus of University of Maryland, College Park. In fall of 2015, I traveled to Durham, North Carolina to interview Dickerson's daughter, Anitra Dickerson-Duncan. I intended to interview Dickerson's mother, Gerthyl Rae Dickerson; however, the evening before I had planned to meet with her I was informed that she had taken ill and would not be able to move forward with the interview. It was later revealed to me by Glenda Dickerson's daughter, Anitra, that Dickerson's mother was still mourning the death of her daughter, Glenda Dickerson, and perhaps an interview would not be possible.

Regarding Dickerson's early career – from her days as a student at Howard University to her directing *Reggae* on Broadway in 1981 – I spoke with three close friends and colleagues: Dr. Eleanor Traylor, retired Professor of English at Howard University; Breena Clarke, author and former student of Dickerson's; and Debbie Allen, choreographer, director, and Dickerson's former student at Howard University. I also conducted original interviews with producer Woodie King, Jr., theatre scholar Harry J. Elam, Jr., acting professor Vera Katz, director Seret Scott, actor and producer Robert Hooks, scholar of feminist studies Ruth Nicole Brown, and actress Lynda Gravátt, theatre scholar Freda Scott Giles, actress and educator Rhonda Akanke McLean-Nur, social activist Taqueina Boston, and dramaturg and playwright Sydne Mahone. Each shared

fond memories of Dickerson, mainly highlighting what set her apart from other Black (women) theatre makers. These interviews were most-impactful for they gave light to Dickerson's professional career as an artist and an educator.

During the Black Theatre Network's annual conference during summer 2014, I hosted a plenary-roundtable discussion about the life and works of Glenda Dickerson. Entitled, "Reflections: Glenda Dickerson and Black Feminist Theatre," the panel included Dr. Paul K. Bryant- Jackson, professor of theatre at Miami University of Ohio; Dr. Freda Scott Giles, professor of theatre at the University of Georgia; Kathryn Ervin, professor of theatre at California State University, San Bernardino; Kathy Perkins, professor of theatre at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Dr. Judith Stephens-Lorenz, professor of theatre at Pennsylvania State University; Dr. Beth Turner, professor of theatre at Florida A&M University. Each panelist shared how they met Dickerson and how they believed she contributed to theatre as both an academic discipline and a professional practice.

### **Chapter Breakdown**

Chapter one provides a biographical sketch of Glenda Dickerson. Utilizing interviews and archival research this chapter also considers the evolution of Dickerson's theatrical career. In Chapter Two, I introduce Dickerson's lengthy project, *The Project of Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images* within which Dickerson proposes her concept of a performance/scholarship. Additionally, this chapter discusses Dickerson's *Kitchen Prayer Series*, a trilogy of plays that were inspired by the events of September 11, 2001. I conclude Chapter Two with an analysis of the first play within the trilogy, *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss*. I

argue that with this play, Dickerson make a Black feminist intervention into the genre of post-9/11 theatre. In Chapters Three and Four, I continue my examination of Dickerson's *Kitchen Prayer Series*. In Chapter Three, "Staging Transnational Feminism in *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer*," I examine how Dickerson dramatizes the ways in which terror and oppression are gendered acts of war that cross geographic borders. First, I discuss transnational feminism and then I transition into an analysis of the play. In Chapter Four, "Staging Black Women's History in *Sapphire's New Show: The Kitchen Table Summit*," I explore how Glenda Dickerson employs the concept of a "Black history play" as she stages Black women's histories—both real and imagined. Additionally, I make the claim that Dickerson employs the concept of a history pageant which was first employed by W. E. B. Du Bois in his play *The Star of Ethiopia* (1913). In the final chapter, "Citing History in *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*," I analyze one of Dickerson's final play, *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*, co-written with Lynda Gravatt. Whereas this play centers the life of pioneering African American politician Barbara Jordan, I argue that her life story serves as a larger narrative to educate audiences about African American cultural history.

## Chapter One

### Glenda Dickerson's Black Feminist Theatre

The aim of this chapter is to chart a genealogy of Dickerson's theatrical career, thus highlighting important moments that shaped her creative and pedagogical approaches. As it is my goal to examine Dickerson's artistic life and legacy, I utilize primary and secondary sources such as Dickerson's essays and interviews with significant artists, scholars, students, and educators that knew and/or worked with Glenda Dickerson. In short, the purpose of this chapter is to trace and contextualize Dickerson's growth as an artist who contributed to critical dialogue surrounding a Black feminist aesthetic and, subsequently, modeled a Black feminist theatre theory through her own praxis.

#### The Early Years

Born an army brat February 9, 1945 in Yoakum, Texas, Glenda Dickerson spent her early childhood living in a number of places such as Germany, Japan, Ohio, and Oklahoma. Eventually the Dickerson family would land in Syracuse, New York where Dickerson graduate from high school. According to her father, Colonel (Ret.) Harvey Dickerson, Jr., Glenda Dickerson displayed an early interest in poetry. In high school she would participate in oratory contests and perform dramatic readings from James Weldon Johnson's *The Creation* and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*. In fact, it was a Cleveland, Ohio production of Hansberry's award-winning play that sparked Dickerson's interest in theatre. Dickerson shares, "it was the first time that I had seen living actors on the living stage, particularly actors of color" ("Three Women in Theatre" 159). Unsurprisingly, *A Raisin in the Sun* left an indelible mark on Dickerson. As Sheri L.

Parks notes, *A Raisin in the Sun* (the first play to be produced on Broadway by a Black woman), “showed white American audiences the intimacies of black life and validated the daily existences of its black audiences” (“In My Mother’s House” 201). And while the play “heralded the arrival of the Black Arts Movement as well as the civil rights movement as part of the national agenda” (201), *A Raisin in the Sun* also gestured towards a Black feminist consciousness. Parks contends:

Buried beneath all the racially related criticism was the fact that the author was a black feminist and the play bespoke a particular brand of feminism, that practiced by women within the family in traditional black culture. Hansberry biographer Anne Cheney writes that Hansberry was a feminist only in the most general sense, but if the play is put in the context of its time and place, Hansberry appears to be a feminist in a most specific sense, that of Black women coping simultaneously with issues of race, caste, and gender. (201)

A second moment that inspired Dickerson to embark on a career in theatre was when her father gave her a *New York Times* article that chronicled African American theatre director and producer Ellen Stewart’s founding of her off-off Broadway theatre, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club. Reflecting on this moment in her essay, “Road a Railroad that had No Track,” Dickerson writes, “This article changed my life. It showed me that a black woman theatre artist in America could break new ground, chart a new course, ride her own railroad” (13). Founded in 1961 in Manhattan, New York, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club (originally named Café La Mama) rebelled against racial and cultural margins by promoting what theatre scholar and playwright Alvin Eng refers to as “new world border-less order” (“Some Place to be Somebody” 176). “Productions produced or directed by Stewart in the 1970s,” according to theatre scholar Cindy Rosenthal, “drew on many cultures, combining Native American chants and drumming, Bulgarian harmonies, and elements of kathakali dance long before terms such as “cultural

collage” and “multicultural,” “intercultural” and “transcultural” were the subjects of academic conferences and performance studies courses” (“Ellen Stewart La Mama of Us All” 15). Just as Hansberry stimulated Dickerson’s ambition for a theatre that was incontestably Black and feminist, Ellen Stewart enthused Dickerson further with the concept that a Black woman could create a theatre of her own that defied parochialism.

### **Howard University**

Although Dickerson participated in theatre during her time in high school, she felt she was a “victim of integration,” and as a Black student she found herself “often a prompter or a walk-on or just kind of on the periphery of theatre” (“Three Women in Theatre” 160). After contemplating Bowling Green State University for college, Dickerson decided to accept a scholarship to Howard University (an historically Black university located in the metro area of Washington, D.C.), and enroll in the school’s theatre program. In a 1983 interview with theatre historian Kathy Perkins, Dickerson states:

I chose theatre as a form of expression because when I was growing up nothing interested me the way the theatre did. [ . . . ] When time came to go to college I couldn’t think of anything else I wanted to major in. When I got to college there was nothing else to major in other than English if I didn’t major in theatre. So, I wound up majoring in theatre at Howard. And it just went on from there. I found that it was a thing that I loved more than anything in the world. I was able to express myself. (Dickerson)

Historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) were agents of change during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Howard University was a vanguard among HBCUs as they promoted Black pride and self-perseverance through political,

cultural, and social uplift.<sup>11</sup> An educational home to several notable Black figures, including writer and folklorist Zora Neale Hurston, novelist Toni Morrison, playwright Amiri Baraka, and student-turned-activist Stokely Carmichael, it was inevitable, then, that Dickerson would find a voice of liberation through creativity expression at the institute once considered the capstone of Negro education. Moreover, Dickerson’s love of theatre was heightened by her instructors which included a roster of significant African American literary scholars and theatre professionals such as Eleanor Traylor, Whitney LeBlanc, James Butcher, Ted Shine, Anne Cooke Reid, Marian McMichael, and Owen Dodson. Of all these theatre luminaries, it was Dodson, Dickerson states, who had the “profoundest impact” on her life and career (Dickerson, “Interview with Perkins”).

Many of the theatre faculty, especially Owen Dodson—a noted poet, playwright, and director—developed and taught a curriculum that was built on Eurocentric values and customs as it pertains to theatre. Dickerson acknowledges, for instance, that Owen Dodson gave her and her classmates “an extraordinarily personal affinity for the classics. Mr. Dodson beat it into our heads in a most poetic way so that Clytemnestra, Orestes, Medea, Hamlet, all of them, Hecuba, Andromache, are like family to us” (Dickerson, “Interview with Perkins”). And though Dodson and his colleagues did “make connections between Africa and Ancient Greece” (Katz and Boston 24), the theatre faculty at Howard University was heavily in tune with European aesthetics and forms, particularly when it came to dramatic material. For instance, Owen Dodson felt that “black playwrights should emulate the great masters” such as Henrik Ibsen (Peterson, Jr. 378). Dodson

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<sup>11</sup> For more on historically black colleges and their role within Black social movements, see Walter R. Allen and Joseph O. Jewell’s “A Backward Glance Forward: Past, Present, and Future Perspectives on Historically Black Colleges and Universities.”

believed that many Black playwrights of the time were “saturated with the idea of Negro oppression . . . that they have left out the lasting power, the universality, of their art” (“Playwrights in Dark Glasses” 35). Dodson clarifies his point in an interview with theatre historian James V. Hatch and playwright Ted Shine published in *Black Theatre, USA: Forty Five Plays by Black Americans 1847-1974*: “In our time when there is so much of black power, and of black playwrights’ throwing garbage in the faces of people, it should be the duty of black playwrights to show what theatre can and should be. We should present all classes of people as human beings” (321). It is obvious that Dodson was critiquing the Black Nationalist stance on Black art, for he believed in a universal theatre, a theatre that spoke a universal and, perhaps, a unifying language.

In their vital book, *A History of African American Theatre*, theatre historians Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch contend, “Very few new and suitable black plays had been written and would not be until late in the 1960s. In addition, black faculty increasingly obtained advanced degrees from northern and midwestern universities, they traveled abroad and saw theatre, and their familiarity with world drama encouraged them to mount European plays” (266). In his book, *Theorizing Black Theatre*, Henry D. Miller writes,

When James Baldwin’s *The Amen Corner* ‘appeared at the Howard Players’ (1954), Jones reports that an English professor ‘groaned’ that the play had ‘set the speech department back ten years.’ But again, this story takes one back to the High Harlem Renaissance; it is almost identical to Willis Richardson’s experience, over thirty-five years earlier, with a Howard Don. When Eugene O’Neill’s *The Emperor Jones* was presented at Howard (1925), Richardson reported, as had been cited earlier, that a Howard Professor ‘wondered why the University would stoop to allow its students to give a performance of a play in which the leading character was a craps shooter and [an] escaped convict’. (186)

Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch chronicle a paralleling attitude at Howard University during the 1960s in *A History of African American Theatre*. They write of Amiri

Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) pioneering play *Dutchman* that ushered in the Black Arts Movement: "The play became one of the most produced in America. When performed at Howard University, Owen Dodson, the director, deleted all the profanity because he thought it would offend the university's conservative, church-oriented audiences. On opening night, following the performance, playwright Jones took the stage and recited the words that Dodson had expunged" (390). As Miller, Hill and Hatch demonstrates, Howard University was very much inundated with what Miller calls "Negro Middle class pretensions" (186).

Although the Howard Players did stage *some* Black plays, there were not readily accepted by some of the faculty.<sup>12</sup> Instead, they tended to produce dramas from the Western-European canon: Maeterlinck, Shakespeare, O'Neill, Sophocles, and Tagore (266). Consequently, the faculty's insistence on a "world-class theatre" was intrinsically seen through the white gaze and, moreover, could be considered elitist as it pushed a middle-class appeal. Nonetheless, the training was rigorous, and the students were committed. As Dickerson would have it, her training at Howard, especially the mentorship of Owen Dodson, imparted her with the tools and "a respect for the craft" (Dickerson, "Interview with Perkins") Although Dickerson would later develop her own style, she would always reference Dodson as a major influence.

Of course, Dickerson's theatre training at Howard was not completely influenced by Eurocentric models. For instance, it was Eleanor Traylor, a professor and scholar of African American literature and culture, who instilled in Dickerson an adulation for African and African American history, literature, and folklore. During my interview with

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Dickerson's brother, Harvey Dickerson, III, he recounted, "I think that my sister [was] modeling much of [Eleanor Traylor's] intellectual curiosity and intellectual pursuit. . . She was more strongly influenced by her" (Dickerson, III). Professor Traylor's beginnings at Howard University – which started in 1959 – parallels with the rise of the Black Power Movement, a radical and revolutionary undertaking that was politically charged with fervor for Black liberation. During my interview with Professor Traylor, she stated:

We didn't fit the mold of bourgeois strata. [We were] very much conscious of the intellectual forebears. We were at Howard . . . surrounded by some of the best thought and progressive action of the time. We were conscious and reverential of those people, but we broke out. Just as you broke out of the cult of true womanhood, you broke out of a cult of thinking about things in terms of ways traditional to European concepts. So, Mr. Dodson was steeped in them as we were. We knew everything. We knew as much about Greek theatre as we knew anything else, you understand. (Traylor)

Traylor expresses that while she and many of the faculty members who were in favor of the newly emerging Black aesthetics of the 1960s were well enlightened of the classics, they were not in favor of centralizing a Western-European canon within the curriculum.<sup>13</sup> During our interview, Professor Traylor also referenced James V. Hatch's biography of Owen Dodson, *Sorry is the Only Faithful One: The Life of Owen Dodson*, sharing a segment wherein she is quoted, expressing to Dodson her dismay of his refusal to embrace the politics of the Black Arts Movement:

Owen [Dodson] felt the black-power movement to be a desecration of humanism. Racism was for white people. He was a paradigm of his

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<sup>13</sup> Amiri Baraka, a spearhead of the Black Arts Movement, expressed that black theatre "is a theater that actually functions to liberate Black people. It is a theater that will commit Black people to their own liberation and instruct them about what they should do and what they should be doing, will involve them emotionally. It will also, hopefully, involve them programmatically in their liberation and should not only be utilizing the so-called Black lifestyle of African people in America but it should also be an act of liberation" (quoted in Baraka's interview with Mike Coleman, "What is Black Theater?" from *Conversations with Amiri Baraka*).

generation, pledged to the finest social views that one could possibly entertain. His exasperation over the revolutionaries of the sixties because they lacked the generosity of spirit was not unique to him. Ralph Ellison shared it. A generation shared it. They never harbored racial hatred. The ugly of bitterness was not upon them. These people opposed every kind of violence associated with racism and bigotry; it was their duty not to behave that way. They felt that education and enlightenment would bring understanding, and racism would go away, and white people would stop being mean and hateful. Owen more than most people possessed an aesthetic vision of life. He finally came into conflict with values he could not accommodate and at a time in his life when was involved with himself. It was tragic for him and his students because he had been one of the honored ones. (226).

Although a colleague and close friend of Dodson, Traylor, too, had questioned his devotion to the Black Power and Black Arts Movements: “We know who you are and your resources. Why in the hell won’t you join this holy walk?” (Hatch, *Sorry is the Only Faithful One* 226). The “holy walk” Professor Traylor was referring to was one of militancy and resistance.

Professor Traylor, on the other hand, was entrenched in the budding mantra of the Black Power Movement which quickly became mantras of the Blacks Arts movement: Black Pride *and* Black is Beautiful. The folks who embodied these Black Nationalist ideas were no longer invested in the Civil Rights integrationist and non-violent model. And they especially were not accepting of anyone who prioritized Eurocentric thought and practices, particularly when it came to their own artistic endeavors. Instead, they were in search of something undeniably Black. Traylor asserts that although there was a “very loving attachment” to the Civil Rights Movement as the vanguards “were Reverend King’s army,” there was, however, a “very strong urge to move forward” with the Black Power Movement. Traylor names Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) as leaders and visionaries for the emerging movement (Traylor).

And, yet, it was because of her instructors' varying philosophies that Dickerson was trained in a variety of theatre styles and traditions: from the Aristotelian model found in ancient Greek theatre to African oral traditions and African American mythology and folklore. Dickerson never abandoned her training in the classics. Instead she found a way to merge her training in theatre classics with her later styles and forms, ultimately creating something unique.

Dickerson graduated from Howard University in 1966 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts. She would go on to enroll in Adelphi University, earning a Master of Arts in Speech and Theatre in 1969. After graduating from Adelphi, Dickerson went to New York for a short stint and found her theatre company, Tough on Black Actors (T.O.B.A.), named in honor of the 1920s-1930s vaudeville circuit for Black performers, Theatre Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.).<sup>14</sup> Tough on Black Actors lasted from 1967 to 1968. Although short lived, T.O.B.A. is where Dickerson began to create a style of theatre from the comingling of drama, history, and folklore (Boston and Katz 22). Before returning to teach at Howard University in 1969, Dickerson spent the summer in London studying with prominent theatre director Peter Brook.

### **Teaching at Howard University**

Howard University had a profound impact on Dickerson. Dickerson, too, left a remarkable impression on the faculty, so much so that she was invited to return as a professor of theatre in 1969. Quite young and a bit naïve at the age of 24, Dickerson

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<sup>14</sup> The moniker "Tough on Black Actors," in which Dickerson named her company, was a term that Black performers of the 1920s and 1930s jokingly used to refer to the Theatre Owners Booking Association. For more on Theatre Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.) see Errol G. Hill and James V. Hatch's *A History of African American Theatre*; Athelia Knight's essay, "He Paved the Way for T. O. B. A.,"; and Lofton Mitchell's *Voices of the Black Theatre*.

returned ready to accept new challenges. And there were several challenges awaiting. One of the more immediate challenges Dickerson faced during this early time as an instructor at Howard was overseeing a reconciliation between the old vanguards who insisted on classic theatre training (read: Western-European) and the new students who were birthing in the Black Arts Movement and, therefore, diametrically opposed to any form of artistic approach that did not focus solely on Black cultural thought and practice. Choreographer, director, and performer Debbie Allen, a Howard University student who considered Dickerson an early mentor, commented on the Black radicalism that emerged on campus during the mid-1960s:

Well, you're looking at the birth of, "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud." Look at what happened. Any student that came there from '67 to '68. Everything that we were going through as a people, as a nation . . . Coming out of the historic marches on Washington to the tragic assassination of Dr. King and the D.C. riots and riots all over the country. All of that was very much a part of what was happening on campus at Howard University. Us getting a sense of our voices, a sense of our power, as a young people. You know, we were already, you know, doing boycotts for more Black studies and African studies before Dr. King was killed. We were already in that place. So, you know, the anthem of somewhere between James Brown's "Say it Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud," and Marvin Gaye's "What Going On," is what was happening at Howard University. (Allen)

Although Dickerson always believed in the power of a Black cultural aesthetic, she was torn between her mentor Owen Dodson's philosophy of a universal theatre and the demand of her new students.<sup>15</sup> Dickerson states:

When I returned to teach in '60, I taught freshman, a mix of students: vets from Vietnam; some hard radicals some who had been in the old tradition.

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<sup>15</sup> For more on Howard University's embracing of the politics of the Civil Rights and Black Power/Arts Movements, see James Smethurst's work: *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005) and "The Black Arts Movement and Historically Black Colleges and Universities" in *New Thoughts on the Black Arts Movement*, eds. Lisa Gail Collins and Margo Crawford. Also, see James V. Hatch's "Theatre in Historically Black Colleges: A Survey of 100 Years," in *A Sourcebook of African-American Performance: Plays, People, Movements*, ed. Annemarie Bean.

I was twenty-four and very green. Everything was challenged and criticized, a process entirely opposed to my training. You could not please that student body. The students thought that everything should be angry. (quoted in *Sorry is the Only Faithful One* 245)

Interestingly, the above quote not only speaks to Dickerson mediating artistic philosophies, but it just as well offers a small glimpse into Dickerson's real-life lessons as a new teacher and lessons in pedagogy.

Dickerson was not aiming to tether the revolutionary spirit that was taking center stage. As she is quoted in a 1973 *Ebony* magazine editorial that payed homage to Black women in theatre, Dickerson stated, "black theater must play a role in helping bring about black liberation" ("Black Women Star in Scenes Behind New York Theater" 110). In fact, Dickerson admired the students' "consciousness" and their "profound love for African people and consequently for themselves" ("Three Women" 163). Dickerson was well aware that anger and rage fueled the movement, but she was also cognizant that the Black Arts Movement was about promoting Black pride, joy, and celebration of Black culture. Dickerson believed that to focus solely on anger and rage was in-turn a focus solely on discrimination and ill-treatment of blacks. As Professor Traylor puts it, Dickerson "saw us not as a victimized people," and for this reason she recognized the obligation to join the "epic that changed the narrative of Black experience toward victimization to one [of] agency." Revolt and resistance, for Dickerson, then, was founded in the process of reclaiming "the heroic and the progressive, our legacy, our history, our heritage" (Traylor). In order to propel a narrative of black history and commemoration, Dickerson realized she needed to take on a more authoritarian position in the theatre: the position of director.

During the 1960s, Black women were being recognized and celebrated as theatre directors because of the strident efforts of Vinnette Carroll, the first Black woman to direct on Broadway, and other pioneering Black women directors such as Shaunielle Perry, Barbara Ann Teer, and Glenda Dickerson, among others. Commercial theatre was still a limited space for Black women directors outside of the few Black women who started their own theatre companies. However, college campuses provide space for Black women to direct plays – both canonical dramas and new/experimental works – while also teaching courses. As such, Howard University provided Dickerson a space to further develop her directing style. In fact, with the following productions Dickerson gained significant attention as an up-and-coming director: *Unfinished Song* (1969)<sup>16</sup>, a dramatic interpretation of a collection of poems and words by a host of writers such as Larry Neal and Jupiter Hammond; N.R. Davidson’s *El Hajj Malik* (1971); and an adaptation of Euripides *Trojan Women* (1971). Garnering public attention as a director, Dickerson was able to forge a relationship between Howard University and several of Washington D.C.’s premier theatre companies. As a result, several of Dickerson’s productions saw life beyond Howard’s Ira Aldridge Theatre. For instance, *Unfinished Song* was remounted at Ford’s Theater in 1970. Likewise, *El Hajj Malik* was reproduced at the Black American Theatre in the same year it was produced at Howard University.

Dickerson declared that directing allowed her “an artistic freedom and sense of fulfillment.” She asserted that it allowed her and other women “to make a statement of our own about really anything that we wanted to” (Dickerson, “Interview with Perkins”). During her time at Howard, Dickerson was, indeed, making a name for herself as a

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<sup>16</sup> In 1970, *Unfinished Song* received the American College Theatre Festival Award and a citation from Walter Washington, Mayor of Washington, D.C.

director. In addition to directing and teaching at the university, Dickerson was invited to direct at several theatres in Washington, D.C. as well as theatres around the country, including Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre, The Afro-American Studio Theatre/The 137<sup>th</sup> Street Players, The Public Theater, the Billie Holiday Theatre, Back Alley Theater, The Richard Allen Center for Culture and Art, and the Black American Theatre Company. While Dickerson directed straight/realistic plays, her most experimental and thought-provoking works were the dramatic interpretations she conceived from poetry and speeches.

### **A Cultural Renaissance: The Black Arts Movement in Washington, D.C.**

While Dickerson was teaching and directing at Howard University, she also made a significant impact on the performing arts community outside of the university setting. As such, this section will discuss Glenda Dickerson's impact on the Black performing arts community in Washington D.C. during the Black Arts Movement from the late 1960s into the 1970s.

According to Taquiena Boston and Vera Katz, colleagues of Dickerson and authors of the essay "Witnesses to a Possibility," Dickerson was one of the leading-pioneers to bring a cultural renaissance to Washington, D.C.:

She preserved the cultural heritage found in the written and oral literature of Afro-Americans. Through theater, she documented the historical past and black people's contributions, and she created new black forms that were suitable to addressing the issues and concerns of the community" (22).

From the late 1960s well into the mid-1970s, the Black theatre scene in Washington, D.C. was led by three important institutions: Workshop for Careers in the Arts (which later emerged into Western High School for the Performing Arts in 1974 and then was

renamed Duke Ellington School of the Arts in 1976), the D.C. Black Repertory Company, and the Black American Theatre, founded by Paul Allen, in which Dickerson served as artistic director from 1969-1972.<sup>17</sup>

Workshop for Careers in the Arts was first to arrive on the scene in 1968.

Journalist S.L. Miller chronicles the history of the Workshop for Careers in the Arts in a *Crisis* magazine editorial:

The story begins on the campus of George Washington University in Washington, D.C., during the tumultuous late sixties, where the staging of a local black arts festival by the University's Black Students Union (BSU) brought Peggy Cooper-Cafritz, then a law student and founding member of BSU, into contact with Mike Malone, then a foreign language teacher at Gonzaga Jesuit prep school. In lamenting the fact that many of the very talented but unpolished children they saw would probably have little hope of ever receiving professional training, the two resolved to create an outlet. ("Duke Ellington School of the Arts" 10)

After reaching an agreement with the then-president of George Washington University Dr. Lloyd Elliot, philanthropist Peggy Cooper-Cafritz and Mike Malone, a renowned dancer and choreographer, were granted a space on the University's campus for an after-school program held from 2:00pm to 6:30pm to train high school students in theatre, visual arts, and dance.

At first Dickerson was frequently invited to the after-school program as a guest artist to conduct workshops. This would later turn into permanent employment for Dickerson. It was at Workshop for Careers in the Arts where Dickerson met high school student and future mentee Rhonda McLean-Nur. McLean-Nur recalls her experience with the after-school program, particularly the mentorship of Dickerson: "We were like little

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<sup>17</sup> Beyond Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow's *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century*, I have not been able to retrieve any information to confirm that Dickerson served as the artistic director of the Black American Theatre company from 1969-1972.

revolutionaries. And we were trained, and we were taught about our history and our culture. And that we were to utilize the arts to address injustices, but also to teach our history through the arts. [. . .] That was the crux of my opening up as an actress, an activist, and as an educator” (McLean-Nur). Mclean-Nur, whom the company members referred to as “Little Glenda,” was inspired by Dickerson’s tenacity for excellence. “Glenda became like my mentor. I really looked up to her” (McLean-Nur).

Taquiena Boston, also a student of Workshop for the Arts and a Howard University graduate-turned-instructor, was also inspired by Dickerson. Boston reminisces about Dickerson’s impact on her career choice:

I met Glenda Dickerson when I was 17 years old. It was the summer of 1971 and I had just become part of Workshops for Careers in the Arts. Glenda was one of the instructors that summer and it was the same summer, I believe, that she was also directing *Jesus Christ, Lawd Today*. So, I’m sitting in class and I see this woman who to me is like to epitome of Black womanhood. And she’s, you know, she’s got lots of fabric on and it’s very Afrocentric and the hair is, you know, cut close and it’s textured and she sits, literally, like a Goddess. There is such a presence of grounded-ness, of knowing who she is and what she’s about. And when I think about it, Glenda was only 27, 28 at the time. So, it was because of Glenda that I decided when I went to Howard University that I would major [in theatre], concentrate in directing. I knew I was going into the theatre program, but it was her and her works that made me decide that what I really wanted to do was directing. (Boston)

While Workshop for Careers in the Arts was developing as an academic and practical training ground for high school students, the D.C. Black Repertory Company was “blossoming at the same time” (McLean-Nur) under the leadership of Robert Hooks, a performer, playwright, director, and co-founder of the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC); and playwright, director, and theatre administrator Vantile Whitfield (who went

by the moniker Motojicho).<sup>18</sup> Hooks shares the story of how the D.C. Black Repertory Company was formed:

Martin Luther King was assassinated, and I got a phone call. I was doing a play and a few television series. I got a call to come to DC, my hometown, because it was burning down. The city commissioner [Walter E. Washington], who ended up being the first black mayor, asked me to “come and get these people off the street because they’re burning down your hometown.” My motivation was to quell the riots after the assassination when I saw my city burning. I created what I consider the essential Black theatre company, the Negro Ensemble Company. It worked brilliantly in New York for all people – black, white, and all minorities. On the train coming back from Washington to New York, I got the idea of coming back home and building a cultural institution, but something that would really rehabilitate the culture of Washington, D.C. It was indeed something very special. They never had a black theatre movement. I came to do what I had done in New York. After NEC’s start, black theatres started cropping up all over. NEC was the genesis. But DC needed what New York needed. Something to fill in the cultural gap that was lost after the riots. And that’s why I came back. The artists were there. The writers, actors, authors. Larry Neal was doing his thing. When I came back, they were waiting for some kind of rejuvenation in the city. They needed a place to do their thing. And that’s why I started the company. (Hooks)

Hooks maintains that the mission was not to create a theatre company, but rather to create a cultural movement. In addition to their annual productions, the D.C. Black Repertory Company served as a training institute for many of D.C.’s finest performers – many of whom would go on to launch successful careers in the performing arts. Additionally, many of the teachers at Workshop for Careers in the Arts were also members of the D.C. Black Repertory Company. Along with Dickerson and Malone, teachers and staff who were doubling as theatre practitioners included dancer and composer Clyde-Jacques Barrett, performer David Cameron, set designer and sculptor Akili Ron Anderson, performer and administrator Kenneth Daugherty, composer and

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<sup>18</sup> The D.C. Black Repertory Company was originally located at the Last Colony Theater at 4935 Georgia Avenue. In 1976 the company moved to 3710 Georgia Avenue.

arranger Dennis Wiley, lighting designer Ron Truitt, and costume designer Quay Barnes Truitt. Concurrently, Workshop for Careers in the Arts and the D.C. Black Repertory Company were committed to the studying and staging of Black theatre, thus developing cultural institutions that “stressed unity, love, self-praise, and glorification, passing on historical contributions, and inner and collective strength” (Boston and Katz 25).

For Dickerson, theatre was to challenge the notion of “art for art’s sake.” In other words, Dickerson believed in the communal power of theatre, and she also stressed that theatre was to serve a pedagogical purpose for both audience and artist. Inspired by the Black Arts Movement’s call for a theatre that was a “cultural revolution in art and ideas,” (Neal 63), the D.C. Black Repertory Company also pushed forward the idea of a whole theatre, that is, a theatre that combines drama, poetry, music, dance, and visual arts.

Overall, the company’s mission was to center “black cultural life of Washington, D.C... It is to be the center of excellent dramatic and dance production aimed at satisfying the cultural needs of Washington’s Black Community” (*Blackstage* 1). The company promoted a collaborative approach to the theatre making process thus endorsing the mantra “Unify us, don’t divide us.” The company’s mission was fulfilled through a set of principles Dickerson honored and championed through her work:

1. The need for Environment theater
2. We must address a non-theater-going audience. We’re creating a new audience with a new value, not appealing to the taste of the commercial audience which already exists.
3. We use the workshop as a key concept, with rehearsals as workshops and training process.
4. We encourage participatory theater at all stages of theater development.

(qtd. in Webster Fabio 80)

Most likely inspired by the 1960s Environmental Theatre movement led by Richard Schechner, the group curated a theatre space that dismantled the fourth wall thus allowing for both pedagogical and cathartic revelations to be experienced by both actor and audience.

The D.C. Black Repertory company championed what Larry Neal considered the “creative possibilities” within “Afro-American life and history” (Neal 78). For instance, many of the plays conceived by the D.C. Black Repertory Company were adapted from the works of notable Black poets. Dickerson, as McLean-Nur asserts, “was very good at taking the poetry of our lauded poets.” (McLean-Nur). Boston, too, recognized Dickerson’s use of history and poetry as foundations for her conceived works:

One of the things I appreciated about Glenda was her sense that history matters. And she always gave credit to the fact that we do stand on the shoulders of others. And that there are those who paved the way for us. And then, for her, theatre was a multi-sensory experience and that’s why she could take poetry from various authors and weave it into a thematic poem and bring movement and music and storytelling and drama. I mean it was like watching someone put together a collage. And I would compare her to . . . looking at a Romare Bearden painting. (Boston).

Fostering an embracing attitude towards non-dramatic literature, Dickerson states, “For me, language continues to be the most important element that must be in any vehicle for the stage” (quoted in Katz, “Solitary Sojourner” 2). Dickerson’s declaration of language, and folklore specifically, is a weighty element within her creative works, signifying her familiarity and constant return to the “drama of nommo,” the performative power of the word.

Playright, director, and theatre scholar Paul Carter Harrison inserted and popularized nommo within the field of theatre and drama in his early work, *The Drama of Nommo* (1972). Harrison asserts, “We are concerned with the activation of images rather

than the creation of forms, through manipulation of the forces in the mode until they give up the power of our designated reality.” Additionally, Harrison asserts that nommo has a vigor “which activates all forces from their frozen state in a manner that establishes concreteness of experience. Reality. When Nommo is activated properly [it has] the power to designate all life forms, be they glad or sad, work or play, pleasure or pain, in a way that preserves...humanity” (xix). Giles, too, has written about Dickerson’s activation of nommo, noting that it allowed Dickerson to create a theatre in which the language is actively different from white and male counterparts.

Accordingly, the productions to emerge out of the Black Arts renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s exalted the spoken word of Black folks and when combined with music, movement, and visual imagery, they resulted in history lessons that reenacted the past all while piloting a political and cultural renaissance that would sustain Black art in the future.<sup>19</sup> An example of this type of production is *Black is Us*, a theatrical offering that was shaped and influenced by Dickerson’s contributions.<sup>20</sup> During our interview, McLean-Nur, who played Harriet Tubman in the production of *Black is Us*, reminisced about her dramatic interpretation of Robert Hayden’s poem *Runagate Runagate*, a piece that chronicles a journey of the Underground Railroad. Reviewing how the production illustrated a trajectory of the Black American experience, McLean-Nur explains, “*Black is Us* was history and we talked about slavery, we picked cotton, we sang songs, and it

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<sup>19</sup> The Black theatre movement during this period was just as devoted to shedding light on newly emerging Black playwrights. The company produced the works of Clay Goss (*Home Cookin’*; *Space in Time*; and *Of Being Hit*), Evan Walker (*The Message*; and *Coda*), Ron Daniels (*Swing Low, Sweet Steamboat*), and Berniece Johnson Reagon (*Upon this Rock*; *Rites*; and *Nigger*), among others. Additionally, the company produced works by playwrights who were a bit more established within the commercial theatre arena, such as Ed Bullins (*Clara’s Ole Man*) and Douglas Turner Ward (*Day of Absence*).

<sup>20</sup> It is unclear as to who conceived this work, but according to Rhonda McLean-Nur, Dickerson and Dennis Wiley were a part of the staging of *Black is Us*.

moved on up through history, through reconstruction, and to [the] Civil Rights Movement” (McLean-Nur).

The artists of the Black theatre movement of D.C. not only recognized the need for a theatre that maintained what W.E.B. Du Bois’ considered the four principles for a “real negro theatre,” that is, a theatre that is “by us, for us, about us, and near us” (“Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre” 135), but movement participants also heard Amiri Baraka’s calls for a fifth principle: a black theatre that is liberating. To that end, the Black theatre movement of Washington, D.C. fulfilled what both Du Bois and Baraka insisted upon: a Black theatre that centered the black community. In fact, Dickerson believed so strongly in the notion that theatre should reflect society and, therefore, bring about societal change that she visualized the coming of a National Black Theatre that would be “housed in and supported by the black community.” Dickerson held that “it is important that we have our own theatre so we don’t have to hush up; in order to cut away some of that self-consciousness [rather than] to have to explore ourselves right in front of the larger culture. Here we could give voice to new visions, new reflections, and new cleansings. Here the audience could go away with a brighter light than they came in with” (Katz, “Solitary Sojourner” 26). Dickerson’s goal for a National Black Theatre never came to fruition; however, the inspiration and influence of the Workshop for Careers in the Arts and the D.C. Black Repertory Company made an indelible mark on the students they trained, the artists who partook in the work, and most-certainly left everlasting impressions on their audiences.

### **Dickerson as Conceiver and Director**

In this section, I pay close attention to some of Dickerson's conceived works during the 1970s, the works she deemed "miracle plays." By paying close attention to these plays, I highlight some of the works conceived and directed by Dickerson that illustrates some of the principles and aesthetics to emerge out of the Black Arts Movement. In her essay, "The Cult of True Womanhood" Dickerson defines the miracle play

as a tapestry for the stage. It is at the other end of the spectrum from realism. It is, at once, more ancient and more futuristic than the traditional miracle play. It is rooted in and based upon myth, but it is not an enactment of a myth. Rather, these miracle plays recognize myth as the original mother tongue. My miracle plays embody history, culture, literature, symbols, dreams, and inspiration. They put the events of the extraordinary together in a meaningful way. (180)

These works include *Trojan Women* (1970, Howard University); *Jesus Christ, Lawd Today* (1972, Sylvan Theater, Washington, D.C.); *Jump at the Sun* (1972, Theater Lobby, Washington, D.C.); *Owen's Song* (1973, Last Colony Theatre, Washington, D.C.); and *Magic and Lions* (1977, Women's Interart Theatre, New York). These miracle plays, as Freda Scott Giles asserts, "consisted primarily of performed African American poetry enriched by folkloric references and music" ("Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu" 135). With these "miracle plays," Dickerson was mainly focused on staging the "drylongso," what she recognizes as the "ordinary, plain, everyday" people ("Cult" 110). In staging the drylongso, Dickerson was bringing to the forefront what John Langston Gwaltney calls "core black culture" that is embodied by personal narratives which expresses the "values, systems of logic and world view" of everyday people (*Drylongso* xxii-xxx).

Dickerson's focus on the drylongso can be observed in her play *Jesus Christ, Lawd Today*. At first the play seems to be a gospel story set to music with Jesus as a

“Malcolm X like character leading poor African Americans,” as described by theatre historian Samuel Hay (121). According to Taquiena Boston, however, *Jesus Christ, Lawd Today* was centered on “someone who’s regarded as God, but translating it to the time we were in. So, instead of saying ‘we had no king but Caesar,’ the line was ‘we had no king but Nixon, crucify him’.” Jeanne-Marie A. Miller, critic of theatre for *Black World* magazine and then-professor of English at Howard University reviewed the production:

His followers are poor Blacks. The tale narrated by Mary, the mother of Jesus, is one of complexity – a satire on white America, an indictment which does not leave the Blacks unscathed. The music and the dances are organically related to the plot. A wooden ramp, running up the center of the auditorium, extended the acting area, bringing the players closer to the audience. Under the direction of Miss Dickerson, many scenes became amazingly vivid and memorable. Who shall forget Jesus’ followers realistically urging their leader not to attempt the impossible feat of walking on the water? Jesus, of course, strides triumphantly across, while Doubting Thomas sinks. Throughout the play one chant haunted us: “Unify us; don’t divide us.” Although Jesus dies on the gallows, the drama ends on a note of hope, with the last words we hear following us out of the theater and into the night: “Reach out and touch somebody’s hand – make this a better world if you can.” (“Theatre Roundup: Review of Jesus Christ, Lawd Today” 46)

By translating a biblical story into a 1970s-urban folktale Dickerson promoted Black culture through positive images of Black characters. The play was further heightened with music scored by Clyde Jacques-Barrett and choreography by Debbie Allen. After premiering in Washington, D.C., the production toured in Boston, Massachusetts.

Dickerson reflects on her experience in Boston:

And here we are in the middle of racist Boston and this racist institution, and the Jesus figure was a very urban African figure, and when he did the Sermon on the Mount we had to stop the show for twenty minutes because the whole audience had gotten filled up to the brim and was just dancing in the aisles. You know, they wouldn’t sit down! And we’d end the thing, and somebody would beat the tambourine and it would start back up again, and for twenty minutes this went on” (“Three Women” 167).

As Dickerson purports, these types of ecstatic responses from the audience were not uncommon when it came to the productions created during this period (“Three Women” 167).

In the same summer that *Jesus Christ, Lawd Today* premiered at the Black American Theatre Company, Dickerson also directed N.R. Davidson’s *El Hajj Malik*. Breena Clarke, a student of Dickerson’s from Howard University who also served as stage manager for several of Dickerson’s productions, reminisces about Dickerson’s ability to transform a script into a lively, energetic production:

Let me tell you about *El Hajj Malik*. That play, as it exists on paper, is so damn boring. [It would] put anybody to sleep. N.R. Davidson’s play is what I would consider closet drama. It’s really impractical. Glenda, however – this just goes to show you how her mind worked. She saw that play and all she could think of was all of those wonderful ideas she could pull out of it. So, we did *El Hajj Malik* and I want you to know *El Hajj Malik* was something. People loved that play. (Clarke)

Although *El Hajj Malik* is a scripted drama, Dickerson’s magical touch elevated the play by adding music and choreographed movement. Even more, *El Hajj Malik* is an example of Dickerson’s feminist-consciousness as she opposed gender norms with casting. As Clarke states, Dickerson “was not constrained by a skimpy imagination or the sting of a rebuke” as she “gave Malcolm X’s words to us all without regard to gender” (Whirlwind” 6). As evidenced with *El Hajj Malik* Dickerson did not believe in gender binaries when it came to the Black protest thru the arts. One contends that this an early sign of Dickerson’s Black feminist praxis.

Another production that follows in the tradition of the “miracle play” was *Owen’s Song*, co-conceived with Mike Malone. Produced in 1973 as a Pre-60<sup>th</sup> birthday

celebration for Owen Dodson, *Owen's Song* was reviewed by *New York Times* theatre critic Clive Barnes:

a mixture of poetry, dance, drama and music in a homage to the black poet and teacher Owen Dodson. It uses excerpts from Mr. Dodson's poems; many of 'which are concerned with climbing a ladder to catch the bird of freedom. The story line, which is deliberately loose, has been taken from Mr. Dodson's own full-length play "Bayou Legend," and the whole work represents the aspirations and the attainment of physical but, just as important, spiritual freedom —the capture of the white bird. [. . .] What they have devised is beautiful. [. . .] "Owen's Song" is a, kind of pictogram for freedom. Superficially, it is almost a dance work, but the poetry is also omnipresent, so it becomes a masque for our day, lyrical, succinct and meaningful. There is an infectious joyousness to the piece, a visual beauty add a swiftly poetic message. The theme, taken I understand from "Bayou Legend," is of a young man climbing a ladder to catch that bird of freedom. This is a seamless masque and it is quite impossible to see where choreography starts or' drama ends. It has the essence of poetry to it, with a grandeur of concept and a simplicity of effort. It has a style of its own, and trades in images. It is an unusually [sic] pregnant piece of theater, subtly suggestive of future possibilities, perhaps of some concept of the dance/music/poem staged with theatrical grace. "Owen's Sang" is tuneful, meaningful and black. You can listen to it. ("*Owen's Song* at D.C. Black Repertory Company" 28)

What Barnes indicates in his review was the dawning of what would later be branded as a "choreo-poem," a term typically associated with and popularized by playwright Ntozake shange and her award-winning play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide / when the rainbow is enuf* (1976). In terms of structure, the choreo-poem can be described as a "non-linear dramatic pattern that distorts an 'oppressive' language and dialogue tradition, obscuring the progression of action and character" (Effiong 125). Based in rituals, steeped in the Black church with its call and response effect, and reviving an African-oriented concept of communal-performance, the choreo-poem fuses several elements together: spoken word/storytelling, music, dance/movement, and sometimes audience

participation. Significantly, elements of the choreo-poem would become staples found in many of Dickerson's conceived works.

Just as Dickerson adapted black poetry into tapestries for the stage, she would also adapt novels and other contemporaneous sources. For example, in 1972 Dickerson adapted Zora Neale Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* into a staged production entitled *Jump at the Sun*. Produced at Theatre Lobby in Washington, D.C., Dickerson's adaptation was staged one year prior to Alice Walker's founding of Hurston's unmarked grave and her subsequent recuperation of Hurston's writings. Whereas there are over ten characters in Hurston's novel, Dickerson's adroit skill of adaptation allowed her to fashion a script that called for only four actors: one actor played the main character Janie Starks, while each of the three remaining actors played multiple characters. Breena Clarke, a student-protégé of Dickerson's, served as a stage manager for the production. Clarke shares how Dickerson created a well-received production from scant resources. For instance, Clarke remembers flicking a flashlight on and off to create lighting and dramatic effect for the hurricane scene. "It was laughable," Clarke maintains, "But chile, there wasn't a dry eye in that theatre" (Clarke).

Clarke praises Dickerson for shedding light on Zora Neale Hurston prior to the advent of praise given to Alice Walker for her celebrated excavation of Hurston's work. Clarke expressed that when Dickerson handed her a copy of the novel she remembered "thinking perhaps my life wouldn't be the same after. That [novel] was a hell of a thing" (Clarke). Likewise, scholar, poet, and filmmaker Cheryl L. Clarke recognizes Dickerson as a cultural worker who used her efforts to commence the "renaissance of Zora Neale Hurston." Cheryl L. Clarke states, "Dickerson's production of *Jump at the Sun* set me on

a lifelong path of discovery of Black women writers and I am still discovering. Her stage adaptation of this novel was magical and remains a magical moment” (quoted in “Whirlwind, Wunderkind, Womanist Warrior” 15).

Dickerson expressed the following sentiment regarding her adaptation of non-dramatic works, “I want to take the magic out of books and put it on the stage” (quoted in Katz, “Solitary Sojourner” 5). In staging non-dramatic texts, Dickerson materializes what theatre scholar Sandra L. Richards considers “the absent potential.” In her essay, “Writing the Absent Potential: Drama, Performance, and the Canon of African-American Literature,” Richards contends that “the unwritten, or an absence from the script, is a potential presence implicit in performance” (161). This leads one to ask, what elements of the poem or novel are made visible when the text is spoken aloud on the stage by actors? How is the story amplified when lights, costumes, and elements of scenery are added? As Richards argues, the embodiment of a written text – a nondramatic text to be precise – through performance affords both performers and audience the opportunity to “speculate on the ways that absence may become present in performance” (161), further channeling “the latent intertexts likely to be produced in performance” (156). As a director, Dickerson placed hefty attention on the text, sometimes spending several weeks on table work and conducting analysis with the performers. Theatre scholar and Dickerson’s former colleague at Spelman College, Paul Bryant-Jackson, remembers Dickerson’s tablework with performers as “long and hard and exquisite, and when they stood up they knew the play” (“Reflections”), for she believed that a performer’s successful delivery depended on the embodiment of the narrative.

Receiving an Emmy Award nomination in 1971 for her direction of the television performance of Alice Childress' play, *Wine in the Wilderness*; a Peabody award in 1972 for conceiving and directing *For My People*; and an Audelco Award for Best Director in 1977 for *Magic and Lions*, Dickerson became one of the preeminent directors of her time. As a Black woman pioneering the emergence of contemporary Black theatre, this was no easy feat. Dickerson found herself being requested for many great opportunities around the country. For instance, in 1977 Dickerson was hired to direct *African American Reflections* for an event hosted at the Smithsonian Institute wherein she directed noted performers Cicely Tyson, Esther Rolle, and Roscoe Lee Brown.

In 1978 Dickerson was hired as resident director for the Negro Ensemble Company (NEC). As a result of her new position, she directed Judi-Ann Mason's *Daughters of the Mock* (1978) and Alexis De Veaux's *A Season to Unravel* (1979). With these productions, Dickerson worked with a host of distinguished actors like Michelle Shay, Frances Foster, L. Scott Caldwell, Barbara Montgomery, and Adolph Caesar. Moreover, the NEC afforded Dickerson ample opportunities to dabble in works that, to quote Douglas Turner Ward, "provided the NEC with unique female perspectives and additional stylistic diversity" ("Foreword" xvii). Even with all the accolades, however, professional theatre did not sustain Dickerson financially.

According to Dickerson's daughter, Anitra Dickerson Duncan, Dickerson turned to academia primarily as way to support herself and her family (Duncan). While the turn to academia had its economic advantages, Dickerson would also come to realize that academic theatre allowed her both a space and a sense of freedom to conceive and direct works that were not typically accepted in the mainstream arenas.: "My vision as a

creative artist was firmly rooted in the oral traditions of African slaves, of the masking miming ritual spied on the plantations in the knowledge that in African art the audience is chorus. My vision could not be contained in a bedroom, a kitchen. I wanted to lead the choral dance of misplaced people – the flying Africans and thus experience ecstasy” (“Wearing Red” 156).

### **Finding a Liberatory Voice**

In this section I discuss when Glenda Dickerson came into her Black feminist consciousness. First, I discuss when Dickerson was hired to direct the 1980 Broadway production of *Reggae: A Musical Revelation*. I do so to contextualize the turn of events that led Dickerson to no longer desire to direct within mainstream-commercial venues and subsequently inspiring her to conceive and direct more women-centered works. I then discuss when Dickerson directed Alexis De Veaux’s *NO!* wherein Dickerson claimed that she found her “liberatory voice.”

Dickerson’s big break in mainstream commercial theatre came in 1980 when she was hired by Woodie King, Jr. to direct *Reggae: A Musical Revelation*, starring Sheryl Lee Ralph,<sup>21</sup> Philip Michael Thomas, and Obba Babatundé. *Reggae* marked Dickerson as the second Black woman to direct on Broadway,<sup>22</sup> albeit the experience for Dickerson was not particularly pleasant. According to Dickerson’s brother, Harvey Dickerson, III, the horrid experience began during the early part of the creative process. Like many Broadway musicals, *Reggae* featured a love story, but a major part of the musical was its emphasis on reggae music and Rastafarianism. Dickerson traveled to Jamaica to conduct

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<sup>21</sup> Sheryl Lee Ralph replaced Ruth Cooke in the role of Faith. According to *Jet* magazine’s April 10, 1980 edition, “Rumblings on the Set,” Cooke, Dickerson, and Malone were all fired around the same time.

<sup>22</sup> The first Black woman to direct on Broadway was Vinnette Carroll with the gospel musical *Don’t Bother Me I Can’t Cope* (1972).

research with famed musician Bob Marley and his band. As Dickerson's brother explains, "She was so disappointed because they would just lay around and smoke dope all day long . . . She was so disappointed by Bob Marley" (Dickerson, III). Harvey Dickerson also remembers there being tension between his sister and the producers. "I would be in some of these meetings. She would talk to me afterwards about what she wanted to do – this with that and they wanted to do that with this. Compromises and all that" (Dickerson, III).

Breena Clarke was the stage manager and an ensemble member for *Reggae*. She, too, recalls the turmoil between Dickerson and the producers: "I have fond memories of it on the one hand, but if the truth be told it was disastrous from A to Z. She ended up being fired" (Clarke). Clarke laments that none of the producers, including Woodie King, Jr., supported Dickerson amid the mayhem. Clarke writes that *Reggae* "was a perfect example of the vagaries of Broadway with a dollop of racism and sexism added. The less said the better" ("Artistic Statement" 33). What Clarke evokes here is the history of racism and sexism within mainstream commercial theatre. Anne Fliotsis and Wendy Vierow offer context.

"[P]roducers in positions of power are often white men, whose background influences the aesthetics of what they choose to produce and whom they choose to hire. Therefore, not only are they less likely to hire a woman, but they are even less likely to hire a woman who isn't white. These white producers may also choose to mentor people who remind them of themselves at a younger age: other white men. In addition, any prejudices that white male producers may hold against women are compounded by prejudices that they have against people from cultures that are different from their own. Thus, a director who is both a woman and a person of color faces an exceptionally hard battle. (*American Women Stage Directors* 24).

It is easy to follow this line of logic with regards to racism and sexism within the theatre industry. A survey of the history of Black women directors on Broadway, in which there has only been three – Vinnette Carroll (1971), Glenda Dickerson (1980), and Debbie Allen (2008) – illustrates the absence of Black women as directors in mainstream commercial theatre.

Clarke further asserts that Dickerson, whom she considered a mentor in the theatre world, learned a valuable lesson. During our interview, Clarke speaks to the lack of support Dickerson received amid the troubles of the project:

In the business of mounting a production . . . you can't trust that anybody is your friend in that. You have to look at it as if all of these people are looking out for their own interests because that's what they're all doing. So, Woody King didn't really support Glenda when the other people were acting up. (Clarke)

Calling it “a whirlwind and a disaster” (Clarke 15), Breena Clarke observed that Dickerson’s experience with *Reggae* was an “eye-opening moment” for her (Clarke). In an interview with theatre scholar Anne Fliotsos, Dickerson expressed that the experience of directing on Broadway was so devastating that she vowed to never direct for mainstream commercial theatre again (*American Women Stage Directors* 153).

While Dickerson did continue to direct at regional and community theatres, one observes, however, that many of the works she went on to direct (and conceive) were plays by and about Black women: *No!* by Alexis De Veaux (1981, New Federal Theatre, New York); *The Haitian Medea, an original adaptation* (1982, Hansberry-Sands Theatre, Milwaukee); *Ma Lou's Daughter* by Gertrude Greenidge (1983, No Smoking Playhouse, New York City); *Black Girl* by J.E. Franklin (1986, Second Stage, New York City); *Tale of Madame Zora* by Aishah Rahman (1986, Ensemble Studio Theatre, New York City);

*Long Time Since Yesterday* by P.J. Gibson (1988, Saint Louis Black Repertory), *Wet Carpets* by Marion Warrington (1988, Crossroads Theatre Company, New Brunswick, New Jersey), and *Shakin' the Mess Outta Misery* by Shay Youngblood (1988, Horizon Theatre Company, Atlanta). It is important to note that these productions heralded Dickerson's turn towards a Black feminist consciousness through artistic praxis while simultaneously evidencing the burgeoning of Black women playwrights receiving a steady stream of productions at well-established theatre companies.

Dickerson reflects on her choice to focus primarily on women-centered works in some of her critical essays, namely "The Cult of True Womanhood" and "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say *NO!*," explicitly expressing her commitment to decentering herself and subsequently her art from "the norms of a dominant heterosexual ideology" ("Wearing Red" 157). Dickerson states, "Having offered to sell my life as dearly as possible in the 1960s, I longed to become a competent and complete personality in the 1980s..." (156). The second essay, "Wearing Red: When a Rowdy Band of Charismatics Learned to Say *NO!*," details her cathartic experience when she directed Alexis De Veaux's *No!*, a play about Black Lesbian political activists. Prior to freeing herself from the patriarchal constraints of Black male valorization of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement, Dickerson felt that she was saddled with several misconceptions. One misconception, Dickerson writes, "was that I was to serve black men" ("Wearing Red" 156). Accordingly, the work Dickerson staged during this period centered Black men. Aiming to "lay to rest the bugaboo that Black people had no history, no culture," Dickerson expresses that she "glorified the kings of Africa and the heroes of African-American folklore – mostly male" ("Cult" 112). Dickerson recalls her experience

in directing *The Unfinished Song* (1969): “the actors sang the praises of Alain Locke’s ‘new Negro’ and concluded with a peacock feather-bedecked ‘king’ leading them in this traditional African poem”:

Many days have passed  
They will wake and come again  
We are a master people  
A free people

Dickerson asserts, however, “These ‘free people,’ though genderless in the poem, were stealthily understood by all to be the “new Negro,” the Black Panther, Black Power, Beautiful Black, New Black Man” (“Cult” 112). Exhausted with the being a daughter of the patriarchy, Dickerson observes that when she co-created and directed Alexis De Veaux’s *NO!* she found her “liberatory voice...” (“Wearing Red” 158).

There were three steps, Dickerson proclaims, to finding her liberatory voice. “The first step was approaching Alexis De Veaux and forming a collaboration to produce a new piece based on a collage of De Veaux’s poetry, plays, critical essays, and short stories. A major element within De Veaux’s writing is the topic of sexuality, which Dickerson wanted to highlight because women’s sexuality – especially queer sexuality – was typically considered ‘things unspoken, the taboos, the personal stuff’ (“Wearing Red” 158). Thus, the collaborators embraced what Audre Lorde referred to as the act of transforming silence into language, thus activating the belief that what is important “must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risk of having it bruised or misunderstood” (“Transforming Silence into Language and Action” 40). Mel Gussow, theatre critic for *The New York Times*, intrinsically likened *NO!* to Ntozake shange’s *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf*, stating that “The two shows are sisters-in-arms in terms of passion and poetry” (14). This is a noteworthy

statement for Gussow to make. Beyond the mere fact that both employ a “choreo-poem” style of staging, both *NO!* and *for colored girls...* are performance pieces that illustrate complex experiences with regards to race, gender, and sexuality while also affirming a Black feminist aesthetic. Furthermore, both *NO!* and *for colored girls...* divorced themselves from a Black Nationalist aesthetic that believed in privileging content over form. In doing so, Dickerson and De Veaux, as well as Shange, expressed through their performance pieces that not only is the message important, but the ways in which the message is delivered is equally important.

The second step towards finding a “liberatory voice” was in Dickerson and De Veaux’s choice to produce the work on their own rather than waiting for a theatre company to offer space and financial backing. The third and significantly vital step was deconstructing the rehearsal space from one of hierarchy to one of collaboration. Collaboration and ensemble-based performance were always present in Dickerson’s work; yet, in this case, she questioned her role as director. In other words, Dickerson wanted to challenge the notion that the director was the sole or lead visionary during the rehearsal process. As Dickerson laments, “Gone was the pompous director’s gaze, absent the royal director’s chair” (“Cult” 161). No more longing to sit among the “ranks of directors,” Glenda Dickerson declared herself a “PraiseSinger.” Dickerson explains:

A true PraiseSinger is a guardian of the archetypes of her culture’s collective unconscious. Her function is not to invent but to rediscover and to animate. From this day forth, I will be concerned not with acts, and scenes and curtain; but with redemption, retrieval, and reclamation. The chair in which I sit will no longer be called the director’s chair, but the blood-bought mercy seat. From that seat, my work will be a mission, my goal will be a miracle. (“Cult” 187)

With Dickerson denouncing the patriarchal throne of the director, it must be noted that she was one of the earliest women directors to question and challenge the position of a director and their function as feminist artist and activist.

When introducing part four of their important anthology, *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, editors Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement pose several questions about the very nature of feminist directors and the role they play when mounting productions. Case in point, Donkin and Clement query whether the feminist director should “be rethinking the way she casts and rehearses? In other words, how can the product be subversive if the process stays the same? Isn’t the directing process itself part of how meaning get created or suppressed” (233)? One-way Dickerson subverted the role of the traditional director was to not refer to the cast as actresses, but rather as Divas. And the one male cast member was referred to as the Count. These weighty titles suggest not only a role of importance but also a position of equal authority with regards to the creative process. As such, Dickerson reworked the notion of “directorial identity and authority” (233) as she allowed the Divas’ voices to dictate the material assigned. Further, Dickerson did not enter the rehearsal space with a prompt book of predetermined blocking, but rather the Divas and the Count were invited to co-devise blocking as their bodies moved to the rhythmic intonations of their dialogue.

In 1988, Dickerson attended the First International Women Playwrights Conference. Held in Buffalo, New York, the conference marked an extremely important moment in Dickerson’s growth as a feminist theatre artist. Dickerson had already declared *NO!* to possess the tenets of a “global context of subversive theater worldwide” which embraced an “emerging Third World Feminism,” (“Wearing Red” 158). The

conference, however, materialized for Dickerson the concept of a global or third world feminist theatre. One surmises that this was Dickerson's first time engaging with women playwrights from around the world – particularly women playwrights of color – of this magnitude. In her co-interview with playwright and theatre scholar Beth Turner and fellow-director Shauneille Perry, Dickerson states:

There were women from all over the world. These women came and spoke, and they weren't silenced, and they weren't fearful, and they weren't garbled. But at the end of it, looking back, what I saw was a collection of extraordinary women, but the women of color have a completely different agenda and we are all the same all over the world, we're speaking the same, and we're really speaking a different language from women who lack color. They are speaking one language and it's a wonderful journey that they're on, but the women of color are on another journey. They are talking about the issues, pure and simple. Aboriginal women from Australia, African women, West Indian women, black women who have been born and raised in Canada, Algerian women – women of color from all over the world. . . (“Three Women” 166)

Dickerson acknowledges that interdependent forms of oppression and subordination – such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, among others – are faced by women from all over the world. Thus, many of these global women playwrights have taken up a number of issues related to women's encounters with patriarchy and misogyny, domestic violence, and erasure through silencing, within their writings. Riding on a wave of women-centered works while embracing both a Black feminist and global-feminist consciousness following her experience with *NO!*, Dickerson proclaimed, “I have learned that I am not Owen Dodson's child, I am Zora Neale's sister” (“Cult” 187).

### **Community-Oriented Applied Theatre**

Between 1988 and 1996, Dickerson embarked on a journey to record collective memories of the drylongso people within forgotten communities. Dickerson's relied upon oral histories and other contemporaneous sources as a method to document the history

and culture of the everyday, ordinary folks of these communities as opposed to “the heroes who flash like lightning or the royalty who sit upon the throne” (“Cult” 181). Dickerson proclaims, “In creating drama from oral history, I pay homage to my ancestors while praising my living kin. [ . . . ] I fight to sing their praises, to keep alive their voices, to make them visible” (“Festivities and Jubilations” 126-127). These works include: *Eel Catching in Setauket: A Living Portrait of the Christian Avenue Community* (1988), *Wellwater: Wishes and Words, A Living Portrait of Newark’s People* (1991), *Ana Bel’s Brush: A Live Oak Drama* (1992), and *Folksay: A Living Exhibit* (later renamed *Talkstory of Style & Substance*, 1996).

Due to her commitment in recovering historic Black communities, furthermore, it has been suggested that these works take up the precepts of womanist theatre precisely as womanism has been used to denote a critical concern for all members of a community. (Giles, “In Their Own Words” 28-29). Moreover, as Freda Scott Giles puts it, these works “drive the audience from cognition into recognition” (“In Their Own Words” 31). For that reason, I recognize how these performances enact tenets of applied theatre as they combine pedagogy, cultural awareness, reflection, and community participation.

Coming into prominence in the 1990s, as Sheila Preston explains, applied theatre is born out of “counter-cultural alternative theatre movements . . .” that aim to represent “a broad diversity of community-based and socially engaged theatre and performance practices that often happened beyond the conventional boundaries of traditional spaces” (5). Likewise, “The boundaries between actors and spectators are purposefully blurred as all participants are involved as active theatre makers” (O’Connor and O’Connor 471). Accordingly, Dickerson was careful to not bring theatre to the communities, but rather

facilitated the communities in creating theatre from the telling and sharing of their own histories. Dickerson shares in an interview with Fathom, a University of Michigan online periodical, her purpose of making drama from oral narratives:

I stopped directing, for the most part, traditional plays a long time ago. I got interested back in the early 1980s in making drama from oral history. . . [W]orking with oral history had a resonance for me. I saw how it transformed people when they could sit and witness the dignity of their own lives how transformatory that was for them and for other people in the audience. For me, this began to be the most important work that I could do: to try to capture a different reality than traditional drama.  
(Fathom)

Lastly, in thinking the plays Dickerson conceived from oral histories as examples of applied theatre, we can see how Dickerson abetted the communities with social meaning-making out of their memories, oral testimonies, cultural artifacts, and historic sites. The first performance I will discuss is *Eel Catching in Setauket: A Living Portrait of the Christian Avenue Community*.

Acquiring its name from the painting *Eel Spearing in Setauket* by William Sidney Mount, an artist born in Setauket in 1807, *Eel Catching in Setauket* was produced June 22-25, 1988 in a black-box theatre on the campus of State University of New York at Stony Brook (SUNY). The inspiration for the production, however, came two years earlier. Dickerson was on faculty at SUNY and while “trying to find something to do since New York City was farther than the posted sixty miles, Africa was across the water, and Heaven only comes to those who wait,” (“Festivities and Jubilations on the Graves of the Dead”<sup>117</sup>) Dickerson decided to take a walk to a nearby community. What she stumbled upon was Christian Avenue, one of the oldest African American and Native American communities on Long Island, New York. As she trailed along the community that was basically invisible to outside communities, including the SUNY academic

community, she took inspiration from two cultural institutions: Bethel African Methodist Episcopal Church (Bethel AME) and Laurel Hill Cemetery. Aiming to revive both the living and ancestral voices, Dickerson writes, “I took as my goal the task of documenting and preserving the history of the people who lived in those houses, along with the histories of their ancestors and descendants, collecting their stories in their own words (“Festivities and Jubilations on the Graves of the Dead” 118).

Christian Avenue is home to several ancestries, including the Eato, Lewis, Edwards, Phillips, Scott, Green, Seaman, Young, and Tobias families. It is understood that many of these families are descendants of the Harts/Sells lineage – some of the earliest Black residents of the Christian Avenue community. In fact, it is their foremother, Rachel Holland Hart, who’s the subject of William Sidney Mount’s painting which portrays Hart in a canoe spearing for eel in 1845. One of the community members to lend her story to the performance was Lucy Agnes (Hart) Keyes. Daughter of Jacob and Hannah Hart – early settlers in Setauket—and church-mother of Bethel AME, Mrs. Keyes was probably the eldest member of the Christian Avenue community during the time of the production as she was born in 1900. One surmises that Dickerson grew close to Mrs. Keyes for she states, “Many evenings I sat in Mrs. Keyes’s front room or garden and listened enraptured to her talkstory” (“Festivities and Jubilations” 119). Theodore Green, Ethel Lewis, Nellie Edwards, Alfred Hobbs, Harry Hart, Pete Tucker, Violet Rebecca (Sells) Thompson and Mrs. Regina Morrison, widow of Bethel AME Church’s former pastor, also shared their narratives, memorabilia, and assisted Dickerson in the devising of the project.

According to Dickerson, the amount of materials donated – from recorded oral histories to the collection of cultural and historic relics – accumulated in great abundance. Dickerson summarizes the demanding task of “shifting, reading, researching, arranging, plotting, planning, checking, cross-checking, and re-checking” within the following statement:

For two years I, along with consultant Fai Walker and student interns, visited in the homes of the community, looking at old photographs and other artifacts, marking them down, wooing them away from the folks for the coming exhibit at Stony Brook. When complete, the exhibit would include photographs, paintings, family bibles, cooking utensils, clothing, hair ornaments, sports equipment, furniture, pot-bellied stoves, and many other artifacts. The photographs and artifacts told their own stories, themselves as eloquent as the stories we heard from women and men who have walked this ground for nearly 100 years. (“Festivities and Jubilations 119)

Although the formal production did not happen until June of 1988, the students assisting Dickerson and Walker delivered oral reports from their research at Bethel AME Church in May of 1987. The oral reports were delivered to the community of Christian Avenue, whom Dickerson referred to as Eel Catchers, “a person who loves people and old pictures and history and characters and folklore and drama and textures and art and fun and laughter and doesn’t mind experiencing them all at one time” (“Festivities and Jubilations” 123).

In May of 1988, two important things happened. First, Beverly C. Tyler, the president of the Three Village Historic Society, dedicated the *Journal of the Three Village Historical Society to Eel Catching*, encapsulating the journey of the project through photographs and commentary. The periodical would also serve as the official program for the production. Second, the performers arrived. The professional actors were Lynda Gravátt, Lee Dobson, Gwendolyn Hardwick, and Kenshaka Ali. The student

performers from SUNY were Rhonda Lewis, Gerald Latham, Jo-Ann Jones, and Michael Manel. Anitra Dickerson-Duncan, Dickerson's daughter, served as stage manager. Upon their arrival, the performers immediately went to work "steeping themselves in the community lore, witnessing the tone and mannerisms of the people [they] would portray and rehearsing deep into the night..." ("Festivities and Jubilations" 121).

*Eel Catching in Setauket: A Living Portrait of the Christian Avenue Community*, also referred to as "a living library," resulted in a host of events that was atypical of traditional scripted drama. For each night of the production, the audience – referred to as Eel Catchers – would gather at SUNY and charter a bus to Christian Avenue. First the Eel Catchers would arrive to Bethel AME Church for a brief history, semi-sermon, and worship-song led by students Jo-Ann Johnson and Gerald Latham. After leaving Bethel, the bus transported the Eel Catchers to both Bethel and Laurel Hill cemeteries for visitation with the ancestors buried in the graves. The tour concluded with a fellowship meal at the Irving Hart Post American Legion Hall where Eel Catchers met some of the pioneers of Christian Avenue such as Mrs. Lucy Keyes Post-Commander Theodore Green. Once the meal was complete, the Eel Catchers rode back to the Fine Arts Center at SUNY for the performance.

Upon arriving to the theatre, the Eel Catchers were greeted by Rachel Holland Hart, played by Lynda Gravátt, standing in a canoe holding her spear. Gravátt's conjuring of Rachel Holland Hart set the tone for the evening. "At that moment," Dickerson recalls, "the Christian Avenue community dwellers, past and present, sprang into visibility" ("Festivities and Jubilations" 121). For the remainder of the evening the Eel Catchers toured the history of Christian Avenue contained in the black box theatre. The

audience voyaged through a history of Christian Avenue, stopping at the displayed artifacts which were highlighted by fragments of dramatic performances.

In one vignette, the performers reenacted Richard Allen's founding of the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1794. After illustrating the history of Christian Avenue's Bethel AME Church, performer Lee Dobson embodied each of the pastors that once lead the church and concluded by imitating Reverend Melvin Raynor's Father's Day sermon from the previous Sunday. The women performers wore church hats and missionary white handkerchiefs loaned to them by the elder-women of the church. Dickerson remembers how it was no easy feat in coaxing Bethel AME's former pastor Reverend Albert McKenzie "who had left under a cloud" to return to Setauket for the production. Reverend McKenzie "buried his face in a big white handkerchief when he heard his words . . . and wept aloud for the duration of the speech" ("Festivities and Jubilations" 122). The performance was met with doses of "just hold to his hand, to God's unchanging hand" (122). The audience's call and response illustrated a high level of admiration and appreciation.

One of the highlights of the production was the inclusion of Mrs. Lucy Keyes in a vignette. Dickerson elaborates:

Lucy Keyes, with the other elders, sat on church pews in the middle of the performance space. When time came for her story to be told, Kenshaka Ali, in the persona of Levi Phillips the Root Doctor, escorted her to an arrangement of her own Queen Anne dining-room table and crystal inherited from her grandmother. Gwendolyn Hardwick sat at one end of the table and Mrs. Keyes at the other. When Gwendolyn quoted Mrs. Keyes, punctuating her lines with Lucy's famous refrain – and I'm 88 – she would turn to Mrs. Keyes and Lucy would smile and say "that's right," blessing and sanctifying the story. By the second night, Lucy Keyes didn't wait for her escort. ("Festivities and Jubilations" 122)

Additionally, the performers dramatized the reunion of Mrs. Keyes' mother and grandmother—a story she shared with Dickerson during one of their many get togethers. “As Lynda [Gravátt] and Gwendolyn [Hardwick], the actors portraying her mother and grandmother, embraced, our eyes filled with tears. We were all returned our mothers' bosoms. We were children again. The frozen tableau took on biblical dimensions” (124).

Dickerson's project, *Wellwater: Wishes and Words, A Living Portrait of Newark's People*. Like *Eel Catching*, *Wellwater* also used oral history to “illuminate Newark's rich history and culture, exploring her diversity and discovering how she fell so low from her rich beginnings” (124). The project initiated in 1989 while Dickerson was serving as chair of the department of theatre and speech at Rutgers University at Newark. An addendum to the department's Community Outreach Program, Dickerson and her students collected stories from several of Newark's institutes of corrections and rehabilitation: The North Ward Center, the Northern State Prison, and the Straight and Narrow Drug Rehabilitation Center for Kids. Not much is revealed about Dickerson and her student's experiences with the interviews. One surmises, however, that the ensemble may have encountered some resistance for Dickerson notes that “the Renaissance city is stubborn as Sapphire. My prying fingers could not force her mouth open. She holds her secrets close and is close-mouthed about her checkered past. She would not yield her talkstory to me” (124). Consequently, the project never actualized into a full production. Instead, Dickerson and her troupe presented a work-in-progress progress at the Newark Public Library on October 28, 1991.

*Ana Bel's Brush: A Lifestory* took a slightly different turn. Instead of collecting stories from a host of folk, Dickerson focused on one central figure, Ana Bel Lee

Washington and her paintings to tell the story of St. Simons Island, a Golden Isle located in McIntosh County, Georgia. With the other community-oriented performances discussed within this section Dickerson relied on multiple voices to articulate the communities' identity, culture, and history. With *Ana Bel's Brush*, however, Dickerson inverted this method by solely staging Ana Bel Lee's narrative evoking a Black feminist paradigm. Dickerson writes about centering Black women within her community-oriented works particularly *Ana Bel's Brush*: "Black women see the world from their own Black reality, but the world we inhabit doesn't recognize that reality. [...] In creating these performances I strive to liberate the uppity Black woman from the shroud of invisibility, take her off the auction block; make her a Blackreality [sic] space" ("Festivities and Jubilations" 109). Nonetheless, with all of these works I discuss Dickerson was interested in recovering Black history within these communities.

Dickerson was introduced to Ana Bel while vacationing with her family in St. Simon's Island. After observing Ana Bel's work at an art gallery Dickerson requested to see more paintings. Ana Bel obliged and invited the Dickerson family to her studio. Ana Bel's paintings depict various places and people of the island. Dickerson laments, "The people in the paintings made the place seem like a space for forgotten rituals to occur. They seemed ready to jump out and beat the drum for dancing on for death" ("Festivities and Jubilations 111). Dickerson recalls her visit to Ana Bel's studio:

I bent my knee repeatedly before paintings big and small and listened to the story of each one. I hear of the Retreat Plantation Hospital and its slave burial ground. Of the old tabby slave cabins, one now a gift shop. Many paintings were of the Black churches on St. Simons and surrounding sea islands like Sapelo. (112).

Dickerson was enamored with one painting in particular, *Ibo Landing*, a painting that depicts the 1803 revolt of Igbo (Nigerian) captives who chose to drown in the Dunbar Creek instead of a life of uncertainty in the new land. Upon learning that Ana Bel was preparing for a gallery at Spelman College—where Dickerson had just accepted a faculty position—Dickerson began conceiving her next project: *Ana Bel's Brush: A Lifestory*.

Dickerson writes about her process in developing the production:

I hired a professional actor named Marguerite Hannah to portray Ana Bel and we went down to the island to tape about four hours of interviews with the painter and to give Marguerite a chance to observe her. We listened to the sailboat windchimes and watched the moon rise. Ana Bel's talkstory, as revealed by the oral history tapes, is an incredible tale of a singular woman who worked in the welfare system in Detroit and then retired to walk the island of the sun" ("Festivities and Jubilation" 115).

*Ana Bel's Brush* was Dickerson's first production as faculty at Spelman College. The production took place in the Baldwin Burroughs Theatre on September 13, 1992. The Art Department's exhibit, "Ana Bel Lee, Paintings of St. Simons Island," curated by professor Arturo Lindsay, was displayed in the Rockefeller Fine Arts Building on Spelman's campus from September 13, 1992 to October 11, 1992.<sup>23</sup>

With *Ana Bel's Brush*, Dickerson conceived an immersive theatrical experience. The audience was seated on the stage surrounding Ana Bel Lee who was seated "front and center" of the production ("Festivities and Jubilation" 115). The performance was heightened with Ana Bel's personal artifacts: paintbrushes, canvases, photographs, newspapers articles, and books she was currently reading at the time of the production. Additionally, pictures of Ana Bel were enlarged and used as backdrops on the production set. The production set also consisted of sand, pine cones, and resurrection moss from the

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<sup>23</sup> The exhibit distributed a program guide that included a Curator's Statement by Arturo Lindsay and a profile-sketch of Ana Bel Lee Washington by novelist Tina McElroy Ansa.

oak trees of St. Simons. Dickerson states of the production, “Some of the magic of the island clung to the moss and sand as Marguerite, who looked uncannily like young pictures of the artist, brought her words to life” (“Festivities and Jubilation” 115). To further immerse the audience into Ana Bel’s world, Dickerson curated a space where the audience was able to engage with more of Ana Bel’s personal belongings, as well as a view a running videotape of Ana Bel’s interview with Dickerson and read transcripts as they were enlarged and placed in the space.

The final production, *Folksay: A Living Exhibit*, was mounted four years later after *Ana Bel’s Brush* in summer of 1996 during the Centennial Olympic Games. Stimulated by early 20<sup>th</sup> century photographs from the collection of Thomas Askew, a pioneering professional photographer of Atlanta, *Folksay* aimed to shed light on the Auburn Avenue district, a prominent African American community in Atlanta, Georgia. Taking on dimensions of street theatre, Giles recalls how this was evocative of medieval mystery cycle plays as the production traveled throughout the neighborhood (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 141). The production highlighted several early African American community members of the Auburn Avenue district. Chief among them were blues and jazz singer Mamie Smith and her Jazz Hounds; Mary Combs, the first Black person to purchase real estate in Atlanta and would later sell the property only to use the money to buy her husband’s freedom from slavery; and Alonzo and Adrienne Herndon, founders of mutual aid association in 1905, which would later become Atlanta Family Life Insurance Company. Adrienne Herndon was also an established actress, one of the first Black faculty members at Atlanta College, and the college’s first professor of speech and dramatic arts.

Dickerson wrote in reflection of her community-oriented projects, “The stories of the painter, the eel catcher, and the wellwishers are haphazardly documented. Some with audio, some with video, some with handwritten note cards. I am the documentation. Within my body I hold the voices, sights, sounds, songs, that constitute the lives of these invisible people as they were told to me” (“Festivities and Jubilations” 126). What Dickerson signifies here is the notion of embodiment, or embodied knowledge – the concept of the body as a historical and cultural source. By validating embodied knowledge as a source, Dickerson reveals the inconsistencies of the written record in which subaltern voices have too often been omitted from historical accounts. Thus, the four performances rely on what performance scholar Diana Taylor refers to as “the repertoire.” Taylor explains that the repertoire “enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge” (*The Archive and the Repertoire* 20). To speak of the communities’ oral narratives as examples of the repertoire is to also take into account the performative elements of oral histories, that is, to recognize that oral narratives constitute both a saying (telling the story) and a doing (creating a historical record).

We must also remember that the performances not only highlighted the oral narratives of community members, but Dickerson also placed equal attention on cultural artifacts and memorabilia, for instance, Mount’s painting of Rachel Holland, Mrs. Lucy Keyes’ crystal inherited from her grandmother, Ana Bel’s paintbrushes, and Askew’s photographs, among others. These items, according to Taylor, exist as archival memory, “items supposedly resistant to change” as “they work across distance, time and space. . .”

(Taylor 19). By including the communities' tangible objects into the performances, Dickerson highlighted not only the personal significance the object may hold for each owner, but more emphatically she calls attention to how the objects, collectively, participate in the creation of a larger cultural narrative.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Dickerson's Black feminist/womanist consciousness carried over into almost every aspect of her life. It is especially evident in her pedagogy as professor of theatre. Dickerson taught at the following institutions: Fordham University at Lincoln Center (1977-1981); Mason Gross School of the Arts (1981-1983); SUNY at Stony Brook (1983-1988); Rutgers University, New Brunswick (1988-1992); Spelman College (1992-1997), and the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (1997-2012).

When Dickerson joined the faculty and subsequently took on the role as chairwoman of the department of drama at Spelman College – a historically Black college for women located in Atlanta, Georgia – she made it her mission to bring to the school works by and about women, especially Black women. Bryant-Jackson expounds upon Dickerson's efforts at Spelman:

She sought to fuse the Department of Drama and the Department of Dance, and, to this end, she facilitated guest artists residencies and performances with noted African American women choreographers Blondell Cummings, Dianne McIntyre, and Debbie Allen. . . Professor Dickerson emphasized that the women of Spelman should be at the center of their own discourse and encouraged student writing and performance pieces that explored the lives and struggles of Black women. She also encouraged the production of works by Adrienne Kennedy, Lisa Jones, Kia Corthron, Ntozake shange, Josefina Lopez, and others. (“Performing Spelman” 241).

Leaving Spelman in 1997, Dickerson's final production at the illustrious college was her staple adaptation of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, this time set during the Rwandan Civil War and genocide.

After leaving Spelman, Dickerson went on to the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor as professor of theatre and drama at the School of Music, Theatre & Dance. Additionally, Dickerson served as head of the African American minor in theatre studies and from 1997-1999 she served as the associate dean of the Rackham School of Graduate Studies. Continuing to develop works of distinction, such as the *Kitchen Prayer Series*, Dickerson nurtured a host of students while at the University of Michigan such as prominent playwright Dominique Morisseau and Ruth Nicole Brown, professor of Gender and Women Studies and Education Policy, Organization and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

In 2011, Dickerson received the inaugural Shirley Verrett Award from the University of Michigan. She received the award for her work in encouraging the success of women of color and students and faculty in the creative arts, as well as for her overall commitment to diversity within the university environment.

After a short illness, Glenda Dickerson died January 12, 2012. On April 30, 2012, a host of performers, producers, former students, and theatregoers gathered to celebrate Dickerson's life and legacy at Barbara Ann Teer's National Black Theatre in Harlem, New York. Speakers included producer Woodie King, Jr., Carol Maillard of the famed a cappella group Sweet Honey in the Rock, Dickerson's former student and co-collaborator Breena Clarke, and performer Gwendolyn Hardwick. During the three-hour memorial friends and fellow artists honored Dickerson as a leading pioneer to usher in

contemporary Black theatre while simultaneously praising her contribution to the intersecting roots of American theatre, community theatre, academic theatre, and feminist/womanist performance.

## Chapter Two

### *The Project for Transforming Thru Performance: The Kitchen Prayer Series*

#### Introduction

At the 1998 National Black Arts Festival in Atlanta, Georgia, Glenda Dickerson gathered a host of other Black women in the arts to discuss a myriad of topics related to Black women and accessibility in the performing arts. Among the topics discussed were: (a) the lack of access to venues which are willing to produce African American women's work, (b) the need for a different kind of scholarship to examine African American women's work and lives, (c) how institutions of higher education can and should foster this creative scholarship, (d) how institutions can and should include the voice of the artist in identity discourses, and (e) how institutions of higher education can and should (with other community sites) be a partner for the dissemination of African American women's work ("*The Project Ford Grant File*"). Formed during this inception meeting was "an informal planning committee" of Black women artists: Sydné Mahone, Rhodessa Jones, Marjorie Moon, Sonia Sanchez, Ruby Dee, Freda Scott Giles, Jacqueline Mattis, and Glenda Dickerson ("*The Project Ford Grant File*").<sup>24</sup> From this collective came the idea to develop a national forum that aimed to implement ways to remedy the concerns that were initially raised at the National Black Arts Festival. Unfortunately, the national

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<sup>24</sup> *The Project Ford Grant File* is a pdf file I retrieved from the Rockefeller Archive Center September 14, 2015. The file includes a proposal for *The Project for Transforming through Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images* (date of submission unknown); a letter of endorsement from the Division of Research Development and Administration at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (date unknown; however there is a handwritten note that says "received 9/12/2000"); a Ford Foundation Project Update (submitted September 12 2001); a letter written by Glenda Dickerson addressed to Margaret Wilkerson, director of the grant, requesting an extension for the grant (dated June 6, 2001); a revised proposal for *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing* (dated March 23, 2001).

forum did not come to fruition, but that inception meeting did invigorate Dickerson to develop a multitude of performing arts-focused projects that would gradually and actively work to tackle the abovementioned concerns.

The first of these endeavors was *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue for Artists, Scholars, and Witnesses for the Future*, a sequence of programming and performances developed in collaboration with Jacqueline Mattis, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Accordingly, this *Kitchen Prayers* program served as a catalyst for a more involved undertaking that Dickerson would later develop: *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images*, a multi-year project that included workshops, scholarly panels, and other activities. Additionally, it is the *The Project for Transforming thru Performing* from which the *Kitchen Prayers Series* (a specific *series* of plays, not to be confused with the *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* project) emanated. The *Kitchen Prayer Series* is a trilogy of plays that were inspired by, and respond to, the tragic events of September 11, 2001. In charting a trajectory from the conceptual stirrings that began at the 1998 National Black Arts Festival to *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* to *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing* and then, subsequently, to the triptych of plays known as the *Kitchen Prayer Series*, I trace the development of Dickerson's attempt to conceive and implement a type of creative scholarship that collapsed the boundaries between scholars, performers, and audiences. In the next section I will discuss Dickerson's first theatre-based programming project: *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue for Artists, Scholars, and Witnesses for the Future*

***Kitchen Prayers:  
A Dramatic Dialogue for Artists, Scholars, and Witnesses for the Future***

In 1997, about a year after joining the faculty as professor of theatre at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Glenda Dickerson initiated a new project, *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue for Artists, Scholars, and Witnesses for the Future* (from here on referred to as *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue*) in collaboration with Jacqueline Mattis, a professor of psychology at the University of Michigan. According to Mattis, “the project was an enactment of narratives from my dissertation study on spirituality and coping in the lives of Black women” (email exchange). Already deeply inspired by Mattis’ research, Dickerson was particularly intrigued with the ways in which Mattis utilized interviews and ethnography as methodological approaches to her work. This is not surprising since Dickerson’s own methodology for theatre making—the use of real people’s words as basis for scripts—was quite similar to that of Mattis’ use and application of qualitative research. Upon joining the University of Michigan community, Dickerson developed a working relationship with Mattis and from this alliance of artistic minds and interdisciplinary approaches rose a plan to conceive and produce a yearly sequence of performances and events centered around Black women’s narratives.

The project conceived by Dickerson and Mattis, *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue*, was intended to circulate around performances drawn from “ethnographic interviews conducted with African and African American women and other sources” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). Explicitly, Dickerson believed that performance could provide a new scholarly language—both practically and theoretically—to challenge the ways in which Black women and other marginalized groups were discussed within academic arenas. Additionally, the project was proposed with the idea that audience

members and artists could interact through dialogue. This dialogue was not envisioned to take place in the traditional sense (for example, through post-show discussions or “talkbacks,”) rather, it was envisioned that the interactive dialogue could happen during the performances.

Dickerson recognized from her own experiences as both an artist and as a scholar-teacher that there is often a dichotomy that exists among these two positions, especially when it comes to discourses surrounding the “question of identity and the intersection of race, class and gender,” in which she argues “has been a scholarly tradition” (*The Project Ford Grant File*). Dickerson elaborates:

The voice of the artist and the performer, if included at all, is typically brought in as punctuation for stodgy academic proceedings: academics read scholarly papers, and then the artist performs. You do not see the artist sitting down at the table and speaking as an equal. That was one of the thoughts that I had: something magical could happen if you included the performer--not the performing voice, but the performer's voice--speaking as a scholar (*“The Project Ford Grant File”*)

Dickerson’s assessment is reminiscent of an observation that performance scholar Peggy Phelan makes about the performative writing and subsequent performances of Amanda Denise Kemp whose work directly challenges conventional modes of knowledge production. Phelan notes that “much academic writing stops short of a chronicle of affect; it tends not to post the information that most deeply galvanizes the investments we make in performing and reciting” (“Introduction: The End of Performance” 13). Believing in the transformative power of performance, Dickerson was moving towards a creative scholarship pedagogy that intervened in traditional modalities of teaching and learning. *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* used performance as a method in which to make traditional academic research concerning the history and lived experiences of Black

women accessible to everyday audiences. As such, Dickerson termed the scripts “recipes for free women.” Dickerson shares how this is done practically:

. . . we shift scholarly attention to the experiences, music, literature, public and private conversations, and everyday behaviors of “ordinary”, easily forgotten Black women. These become the key sources (the witness texts) for exploring Black female spirituality, as well as the meanings that women assign to mundane as well as extraordinary events in their lives. Finally, we place scholarly commentary next to the narratives of women and the narratives of our audience. We use these narratives to challenge and support each other” (*The Project Ford Grant File*).

The term “kitchen” is a complex and quite controversial term. Typically, the kitchen, through the lens of patriarchy and misogyny, is one of the spaces in homes where women were relegated to as a means to assign their domestic positioning. Dickerson, however, like many others, recognizes the kitchen as a space of possibilities. Inspired by Black feminist scholar and activist Angela Davis’ theorization of the “kitchen” – particularly for enslaved women – as a locus of resistance and agency (“Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves”). As expressed in the DVD, *What’s Cookin’ in the Kitchen* (a visual and audible record of Dickerson’s work and performance), Dickerson uses the term “kitchen” “because it is a place of power.” Dickerson’s use of the kitchen as a transformative space—especially from white male domination—is an idea taken up by several scholars engaged in feminist studies. For instance, in writing about food culture and race during the nineteenth-century Mary Titus notes, “The kitchen became a place where black authority could be established and could threaten the [white] household at its very center” (“Groaning Tables and Spit in the Kitchen” 16). Likewise, Olga Idriss Davis maintains that “The kitchen became a space in which [Black women] could realize their inventional qualities and claim self-definition. More to the point, the kitchen offered a space in which they could begin the struggle to

transform oppression into resistance and to challenge the conditions of black women's subjugation" ("In the Kitchen" 370). For the sake of Dickerson's project, the "white household" could be synonymous with academia and scholarly spaces that have historically marginalized Black women's creative and scholarly works. Dickerson encapsulates the above statements and expresses how they are animated within her work with the following statement: "By using the kitchen as the central metaphor for this work, we . . . recreate a space in which Black women are made central" ("*The Project Ford Grant File*"). As such, the performers—whom Dickerson referred to as "prayerful performers"—"sit around a figurative kitchen and talk out their lives" while they simultaneously "talk out the lives of the women whose stories we have agreed to embody with honor and respect" (*What's Cookin' in the Kitchen*).

Although Dickerson concedes to being influenced by Angela Y. Davis' early work on enslaved Black women and how they have maintained a sense of agency and autonomy through domestic work—namely the kitchen—it could be suggested that Dickerson's *Kitchen Prayers* project was further galvanized by Olga Idriss Davis' work. I say this because in her essay, "In the Kitchen: Transforming the Academy through Safe Spaces of Resistance," published in 1999, Olga Idriss Davis explicitly calls for Black women scholars to assume the "kitchen legacy" as a metaphor for elucidating the role of Black women scholars within a historically white male dominated arena. "The relationship between the kitchen and the Academy," according to Davis, "informs African American women's experiences and historically interconnects their struggles for identity. [. . .] The academy and the kitchen are part of a continuum of black women's struggle to achieve equality and inclusion" (370-371). In answering the question of how

African American women intellectuals employ the kitchen legacy to intervene in white-dominated spaces within the academy, Davis points to the ways in which Black women scholars

*redefine* their importance in the domain of whiteness, they *transform* students and faculty alike, and they *define* and *inform* experience through provocative scholarship. Like their foremothers in plantation kitchens, African American women scholars carve out places in the Academy to nurture and transform work once relegated to “kitchen space” outside mainstream departments and scholarly publications for presentation and the intellectual “dinner table” of the Big House. In their scholarship, African American women deconstruct previously-held assumptions about politics and resistance. [. . .] The experience of locating self within history underscores the efficacy of the kitchen legacy: I contend it is within the academic kitchen that African American women scholars can locate their identity struggle and persevere in their efforts to transform the Academy. (372)

Davis notes that this is not particularly a “cerebral exercise,” but the “revelation of an ongoing history of struggle” (372). She further maintains that it is in that ongoing struggle where one can work to “overcome the distance between white, male controlled plantation houses of departments, journals, and impersonal pedagogy and the black female kitchens of ethical care – through critical pedagogy which promotes liberation, theorizes across disciplines, and centers the Academy as a space for community survival and human development” (373). With *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* Dickerson was invested in examining the position of women within various communities through their own experiences, through their own words. As such, Dickerson conjured the words of Margaret L. Wilkerson as guiding metaphor: “let the world see itself through Black women’s eyes” (*What’s Cookin’ in the Kitchen*). Wilkerson’s words, moreover, speak to Davis’ contention that “the transforming power of the kitchen legacy suggests that African American women professors transform others by their presence and by inviting

others into their experiences of struggle within institutions of higher learning” (373). Both Wilkerson’s and Davis’ points are actuated through Dickerson’s *Kitchen Prayer* performances which first and foremost seek to tell the stories of Black women.

Returning to my elucidation on the trajectory of the *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* project, the first performance, *Work(i)ngs of the Spirit: How Black Women Use Spirituality to Cope with Stress* (1998), was formed from 23 interviews pulled directly from Mattis’ dissertation. Some of the University of Michigan students who performed in early renditions of the production included noted playwright Dominique Morisseau, actress Angela Lewis, and hip-hop feminist scholar Ruth Nicole Brown. Brown, then a political science graduate student at the University of Michigan, remembers the performances taking place within intimate settings and being performed in front of small audiences consisting mainly of college students (Brown).

The performances had an especially profound impact on the participating students. For instance, during our interview, Brown discussed the arduous “dramaturgical process” Dickerson implemented noting that there was an “intense focus on spirituality and womanhood” (Brown). This focus on “spirituality” and “womanhood” is indeed a major tenet of womanism. Womanism, according to Layli Phillips-Maparyan, acknowledges “a spiritual/transcendental realm with which human life, livingkind, and the material world are all intertwined” (“Introduction” xxvi). Brown further notes that Dickerson encouraged the performers to discuss how spirituality played a role in “our own life experience” and relate it to “the women characters in the script” (Brown). Brown, who was not a veteran performer nor a theatre major, is calling attention to Dickerson’s laborious tablework process, while also highlighting the concept and

employment of womanism. Dickerson was adamant that performers were not ready for in-rehearsal blocking until they fully embraced and embodied the narratives in which they were assigned to perform.

In further reflection, Brown writes about the impact that *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* had on her and how it shaped her view of the arts as a tool for social change:

As an actor in a revival production of *Kitchen Prayers* I witnessed how the performance transformed our reality. Grounded in the experiences of Black women, the performance encouraged other women similarly positioned to carve out a space in which to share how we deal, relate, and survive in structures that rarely value who we are. As a young researcher, “Kitchen Prayers,” became an exemplar of how to make research accessible in ways that are politically performative. My experiences as a student as well as an actor shaped my understanding that performance as a form of art is political because it exists as form of consciousness and knowledge, symbolizing the expressiveness of political acts. As an interpretive researcher, I learned that through performance I could use my research to create situations in which participants could engage the text in a lived way, where power is generated and shared toward positive ends. (“Between Empowerment and Marginalization” 64-65)

Brown’s elaboration of her experience with *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* is quite telling as she clearly acknowledges that Dickerson’s goal of creating a space where the performers are very much a part of the pedagogical process – as one who teaches and one who learns – had been achieved. The *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* project undoubtedly became the training ground for the type of creative scholarship Dickerson envisioned.

In fact, the success of the *Kitchen Prayers: A Dramatic Dialogue* project motivated Dickerson to revisit the idea of a larger, conference style event that had been previously imagined during the National Black Arts Festival. Some of the finer details are unknown; but what is known is that what Dickerson imagined for this was an “ideal

forum for the presentation of a new kind of creative scholarship which can open up a heretofore non-existent space for Black women and talk out their lives and to convert this talk to scholarship” while simultaneously aiming to “uncover, rescue and celebrate the generally unpopular voice of ‘othered’ women” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”).

Dickerson’s first step in actualizing her vision was to apply for a hefty grant from the Ford Foundation that would financially support the forum. In October of 2000, Dickerson was awarded a grant in the amount of \$99,998 from the Ford Foundation, under the direction of Margaret B. Wilkerson, Director of Media, Arts and Culture at the foundation. After being awarded the grant, Dickerson immediately went to work in conceiving *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images*. In the next section I will discuss Dickerson’s vision for *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing*, specifically providing insight on how the planning phase for, and objectives of, *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing* went through a host of revisions before coming to fruition.

### ***The Project for Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images***

#### *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly*

*Images* was designed to be a public symposium held from April 6-10, 2000. This project set out to accomplish the following goals:

- a. To examine the ways images of black women as displayed in theatre, film and popular media (as well as other art forms) have frequently conspired to formulate an identity construction for Black women that has little to do with reality, and instead, often imprisons us like “Aunt-Jemima” in a box;
- b. To examine the ways that black women’s artistic expressions, aimed at debunking stereotypes and defying limitations, has been developed, produced and valued (or conversely), how is has been devalued and underproduced;

- c. To explore how best to include the voice of the artist in the discourse around gendered identity in higher education;
- d. To foster dialogue that aims at formulating new avenues for the developing, producing, archiving, and valuing of a particular kind of “prison break” creative scholarship. (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”)

The overarching aim of *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing* was to “bring Black women in from the margins and re/place them center stage” (*What’s Cookin’ in the Kitchen*). Dickerson elaborates: “First, it seeks to lift the veil of silence from the lives of drylongso Black women . . . [the] every day black women. They clean the buildings, they teach your children, they held our history. These women are so ordinary that they become invisible, disappear. Secondly, it endeavors to identify a process and an ethos of intellectual dis-covery that is uniquely black and feminist” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). Dickerson’s reference to “the veil” invokes the works of sociologist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois and Black feminist historian Darlene Clark Hine, respectively. For Du Bois, “the veil” is theorized in his oft-cited study, *The Souls of Black Folk*, and symbolized the perpetuation of the color line—either through blindness or ignorance. Whereas Du Bois was concerned with racial oppression of Black folk, Hine’s employment of “the veil” motif was her way of calling out the ways in which Black women have been oppressed twofold: for their race and their gender, and thus they have been historically ignored as subjects worthy of critical study within academia. Hine writes, “And that was the beginning of my commitment to telling the truth, to lifting the veil, to shattering the silence about Black women in American history” (*Shattering the Silence*). Dickerson was establishing a newly emerging commitment to positioning Black women at the center of critical and creative analysis with *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing*.

It was envisioned that the panels, breakout sessions, and workshops – all led by a fusion of nationally recognized scholars and artists – would contribute in accomplishing the goals of the symposium. The opening keynote performance, however, was intended to be the main event of the proposed five-day conference. The performance that was being readied for the symposium was *Speaking in Exile*, a dramatic piece conceived from interviews conducted by both Dickerson and Mattis with women who sought safe harbor in Tanzania after fleeing from other countries such as Rwanda. Dickerson states, “We wanted to talk to them about how they define home and how they passed on their culture to their children when they are not living at home” (Fathom). As the principal event of the symposium, *Speaking in Exile* would not be an ordinary dramatic performance. Like the other productions envisioned for the conference, the performance was intended to culminate with an “interactive dialogue with audience, inviting them to enter the dialogue with their own thoughts on identity and transformation” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). What Dickerson was intending was a type of creative, public scholarship that she referred to as “performance/scholarship.”

Dickerson explains that “with the term performance/scholarship, we propose something more than a type of performance art, where history and lived experiences are simply recounted” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). Instead, Dickerson anticipated a type of event where the prayerful performers “give their bodies to the stories we tell” through the enactment of the scripts or what she referred to as “witness texts.” Whereas the “witness texts” are not constructed in realism, Dickerson was adamant in expressing that she did “not want this work to be facile or perfunctory,” thus the prayerful performers should not approach the scripts as if they are “approaching a traditional dramatic

character where they might construct a background, discover the conflict, and identify the obstacles” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). Dickerson explains:

When the body of the prayerful performer enters a dramatized historic text, or text based on real-life narratives, a spiritual dimension is added by this embodying. The performer brings her own lived-experiences and agrees to stand in with honor and respect for the real woman. The real woman is valorized and validated; in some cases, she can witness the act and thus seal it with her own “amen.” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”)

To be clear, Dickerson was not the first to concretize a performance tradition that attempted to achieve these several ends; that is, challenge traditional modalities of pedagogy, center Black women as active agents of knowledge production, and center the narratives of Black women as an example of Black feminist epistemology. For instance, Joni L. Jones/Omi Osun with *Sista Docta* (1996) and Amanda Kemp with *This Black Body in Question* (1998) have each produced their own type of Black feminist performance scholarship. However, both *Sista Docta* and *This Black Body in Question* are single performances. Thus, in thinking about creative-pedagogical works connected to extensive projects, Dickerson’s venture is closely aligned with Rhodessa Jones’ *The Medea Project*,<sup>25</sup> a lengthy undertaking that uses theatre workshops and staged performances to transform the lives of incarcerated women and those who come in contact with them such as family and friends, fellow inmates, and prison guards. A primary facet of *The Medea Project* is the use of narratives collected from incarcerated women to form the scripts. According to Marta Effinger-Crichlow, Rhodessa Jones uses theatre to “heal” and “empower” women (*Staging Migrations* 228-231).

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<sup>25</sup> The *Medea Project* started in 1989 and is still continuing to develop works that shed light on issues concerning incarcerated women.

Despite all the envisioning and planning, however, *The Project for Transforming Thru Performing*, was never fully actualized due to a host of challenges and difficulties. Evidence of this fact can be found in a letter to Margaret Wilkerson, the director of the grant at the Ford Foundation, dated 16 June 2001, in which Dickerson writes, “the conference could not be successfully accomplished in April [of 2001] . . . for a variety of reasons” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”).<sup>26</sup> However, upon receiving an extension to the grant from the Ford Foundation, Dickerson altered the structure of the project from a weekend length conference to a multi-layered sequence of discrete events that would be centered on “a series of performance-with-dialogue.” Instead of a three-day conference as originally planned, Dickerson was now envisioning a series of events to take place throughout the course of the coming academic year. In the revised proposal to Wilkerson, Dickerson modified the goals of the project to the following:

- a. To shift scholarly attention to the experiences, music, literature, public and private conversations, and everyday behaviors of “ordinary”, easily forgotten Black women.
- b. To examine the meanings that these women assign to mundane as well as extraordinary events in their lives.
- c. To place scholarly commentary next to the narratives of these women and the responsive narratives of the audience. (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”)

While implementing a new presentational framework for her ideas, Dickerson was simultaneously transitioning into the role as director of the University of Michigan’s Center for World Performance Studies (CWPS).<sup>27</sup> One wonders if Dickerson was assuming that as director of the Center she could secure additional funding and academic

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<sup>26</sup> Currently, there is a lack of information as to what the actual problems were.

<sup>27</sup> The Center for World Performance Studies was established in 2000. The inaugural celebration of the Center took place in early 2001; Dickerson became director of the Center in June 2001 to 2009. CWPS is a multidisciplinary space for artists, performers, scholars, and the community for intellectual interactions.

support for her performance scholarship events. Nonetheless, Dickerson expressed to Wilkerson that she felt “the project integrates better with the work of the Center as both take performance for their focus” (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”). Dickerson ever-evolving vision, however, would once again change course. The tragedy of September 11, 2001, otherwise known as 9/11, intervened and rerouted Dickerson’s objectives.

On September 11, 2001, Glenda was at her home in Ypsilanti, Michigan. Upon learning of the series of coordinated terrorist attacks, specifically the planes flying into the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, Dickerson states that she “raced from telephone to telephone in my house, frantically trying to reach my daughter who lives in New York” (*What’s Cookin’ in the Kitchen*). Although Dickerson was relieved to learn that her daughter was safe from the catastrophe, she was still in a state of unrest.

Dickerson was struck by the notion that people around the world experience these catastrophes daily. She states, “it made me wonder what it must be like for women who live with this kind of terror every day” (*What’s Cookin’ in the Kitchen*). Dickerson shared these thoughts with a colleague who suggested that she mull over the idea of relating the story of being unable to locate her daughter to women around the world who experience loss daily. “This idea intrigued me,” (Fathom) states Dickerson, so much so that the tragedy of 9/11 would serve as the dramatic material for the work that subsequently came to be known as the *Kitchen Prayer Series*.

The *Kitchen Prayer Series* is a culmination of three performances: *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* (2001), *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer* (2002), and *Sapphire’s New Shoe: The Kitchen Table Summit* (2004). Created as a “dramatized presentation of actual words of women, accumulated

from contemporaneous sources such as newspapers, magazines, broadcast media and other sources from across the world,” the trilogy presented a diverse array of women’s “memories, feelings and views” on the turbulent nature of violence and war. Dickerson writes:

performances-with-dialogue tried to capture, reflect and understand the impact of 9/11 and other acts of global terrorism, thus offering a snapshot of a terrible moment in time. (“*The Project Ford Grant File*”)

With the third phase of revisions, Dickerson was no longer concerned with just African and African American women’s narratives, but rather she broadened her purview to include women all around the world. As such, Dickerson aimed to interrogate how women, from across the globe, navigate a world where war and terror are quotidian experiences. Dickerson embarked on a journey asking, “What is it like for women all around the world to live with war and terror daily? (*What’s Happening in the Kitchen?*).

*The Project of Transforming Thru Performing: Re/Placing Black Womanly Images* came to fruition in December 2001 on the three-month anniversary of 9/11. The third phase of revisions maintained the structure proposed in the second phase. Thus, *The Project* still included workshops, scholarly panels, and other activities. The performances, in which these scholarly events were centered around was *The Kitchen Prayer Series*, a trilogy of plays inspired by the events of September 11, 2001.

### ***The Kitchen Prayer Series as Post/911 Theatre***

After the cataclysmic events of September 11, 2001 took place, a host of playwrights, artistic directors, and performances artists created works and events that responded to the tragic day. From street protests and performance installations to

adaptations of classical dramas and the renewed interest in documentary theatre, these commemorative performances commanded a strong presence within our contemporary moment; so much so, that a new performance genre emerged: post-9/11 theatre.<sup>28</sup>

Numerous scholars, artists, and critics have written about post-9/11 theatre, either trying to define it, critique it, or, in some cases, defend it. In search of a definition or description of post-9/11 theatre, I find Trav S.D.'s comments to be most compelling. S.D. writes, "In the catastrophe's aftermath, the American theatre community made itself immediately relevant not only through its relief efforts and the creation of forums for the public expression of mass anxiety, but also through the reassertion of its traditional role of providing the public with comedies to gladden spirits and tragedies to purge grief in times of overwhelming public mourning" ("9/11: America's Theatres Respond" 18). And unlike early war dramas wherein mid-century playwrights were "rushing to compose patriotic plays in support of the war effort," post-9/11 theatre has aimed to "examine the effects of September 11 on our national [and international] psyches" (Brustein 244). Thus, post-9/11 theatre chronicles a variety of responses to the tragic events through a blend of personal, political, local, national, and international standpoints. It is without a doubt that Glenda Dickerson's *Kitchen Prayer Series* adds to the growing canon of post-9/11 dramas and performances. In fact, because the first performance took place on December 11, 2001, just three months after the attacks, *The Kitchen Prayers Series* must be acknowledged as one of the earliest examples of post-9/11 theatre.

According to Jenny Spencer, editor of *Political and Protest Theatre after 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*, "Documentary and verbatim theatre provides one of the most prevalent

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<sup>28</sup> For more on post-9/11 theatre, see Jenny Spencer's edited collection, *Political and Protest Theatre After 9/11: Patriotic Dissent*.

forms of theater after 9/11” (8). Carol Martin, too, offers a brief rumination on the use of documentary theatre, also recognized as “documentary play” or “theatre of testimony,” as a major force within the burgeoning of post-9/11 theatre. Additionally, Martin provides context for why documentary theatre is such a powerful form used to explore 9/11 and the subsequent wars: “Those who make documentary theatre interrogate specific events, systems of belief, and political affiliations precisely through the creation of their own versions of events, beliefs, and politics by exploiting technology that enables replication” (“Bodies in Evidence” 9). Martin summarizes in six points the basic principles of documentary theatre: (1) To reopen trials, (2) To create additional historical accounts, (3) To reconstruct an event, (4) To intermingle autobiography with history, (5) To critique the operations of both documentary and fiction, and (6) To elaborate the oral culture of theatre (12-13).

Glenda Dickerson’s *Kitchen Prayer Series* is constructed in the style of documentary theatre—a style that is particularly befitting as this mode of theatre-making can be traced to traditions of oral history. As such, Dickerson evokes a form in which she is quite familiar: reader’s style theatre.<sup>29</sup> According to Gary Fisher Dawson, documentary theatre is “a form of persuasive theatre that can come as close as possible to an actual event with the exclusive reliance upon documentation from historically accurate materials” (*Documentary Theatre in the United States* 17). However, not all plays follow the goal of reliving the actual event. In other words, not all performances under the rubric of documentary theatre aspire to recreate the occurrence through a dramatic reenactment.

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<sup>29</sup> Dickerson only employs reader’s style theatre for the first two plays within the trilogy. *Sapphire’s New Shoe* is staged as a more conventionally scripted drama. I discuss Dickerson’s reader style theatre in chapter 2.

Rather some documentary theatre attempts to conjure the emotions, feelings, and/or perspectives of those affected by the event through memory recall. Dawson further notes, “More directly, documentary theatre is a theatre genre in which primary source documentation is directly incorporated into dramatic text, and the performance text of each play, and a documentary play is one that has had conferred upon it by the institution called theatre the status of documentary play for the purpose of learning about, recalling, interpreting, or responding to, a historical moment” (17). With “historically accurate material” within the *Kitchen Prayer Series* are personal accounts of the prayerful performers, newspapers clippings, audience response, and other reportorial accounts.

Additionally, Dawson infers that documentary theatre has a didactic quality to it. From a feminist dramatic standpoint, documentary theatre has the potential to dismantle hierarchical ways of learning and disseminating information about an event or subject. For example, by placing focus on Black women’s experiences of September 11, 2001, Dickerson challenges the dominant narrative by placing attention on an already marginalized group. Thus, in thinking about feminist and socially-engaged theatre artists who employ documentary theatre, Dickerson’s efforts closely resemble those of Nola Chilton and Anna Deveare Smith. What Linda Ben-Zvi finds in Chilton’s and Smith’s work – specifically the ways in which they’ve respectively “provided a space for these ignored “others” . . . to be seen and heard, to tell their stories, and to emerge from the shadows to which they have been consigned by societal institutions that neglect or suppress them and by the media, which stereotypes or erases them” – is what Dickerson aims for within her trio of performances (“Staging the Other Israel” 42).

Furthermore, with the *Kitchen Prayer Series* Dickerson was not concerned with questioning what happened on 9/11 or pursuing the queries of “Who did it? or “How will we retaliate?” She states, “In *Kitchen Prayers*, I try not to worry myself with how many bombs did they drop? How many caves did they look in? Will they ever find Bin Laden? I want to tell this side of the story, the side of the story that cannot be told because the woman’s voice is left out” (Fathom). To that point, Dickerson was deeply committed in revealing how the disastrous events – from the planes flying into the World Trade Center and the pentagon to the subsequent War on Terror – affected women who live in communities where their voices are typically absent from discourses of politics and war. Affirming this stance, she states:

When we are talking about war and retribution in this world, on this planet, it is always a male dialogue. When you look at CNN, ABC, NBC, you primarily find men talking, arguing, pontificating. It is their story. In this context, the woman’s voice is not deemed valuable and is not present, and therefore, a large part of the story gets left untold. (Fathom)

Dickerson’s assertion is quite political thus making her trilogy a precise example of political theatre. Jeanne Marie Colleran and Jenny S. Spencer argue that one of the possibilities of political theatre is its determinacy to be a “cultural practice that self-consciously operates at the level of interrogation, critique, and intervention” (“Introduction” 1). Sharon Friedman contextualizes Colleran and Spencer’s view on political theatre. She notes that political theatre ranges from “act[s] of political intervention” to “raising awareness about the plight of a particular population and offering a specific political agenda for the conditions dramatized onstage, to plays that function as civic forums, encouraging audiences to consider competing perspectives, thus

provoking a critical and active response from viewers” (“Gendered Terrain” 116). It is within this vein that I perform my analysis of Glenda Dickerson’s *Kitchen Prayer Series*.

Accordingly, I am interested in exploring how Glenda Dickerson uses theatre not only to commemorate a national tragedy, but how she also further propels a platform that deliberately and simultaneously interrogates, critiques, and intervenes in the burgeoning discourse of 9/11. In the remaining pages of this chapter, I analyze the first play within the trilogy, *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss*.

### **An Analysis of *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss***

*Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* first premiered on December 11, 2001 on the three-month anniversary of 9/11. The cast included Sandra Love Aldridge, Walonda J. Lewis, Denise Lock, Lisa M. Richards, Tanya Tatum, Rhonda Williams-Bantsimba, and Glenda Dickerson. It was remounted the following year on May 19, 2002. For the second production, Kim Staunton replaced Tanya Tatum and Rhonda Williams-Bantsimba. Additionally, Dickerson and her team were invited to present *Performance Dialogue* in Istanbul, Turkey during the summer of 2002.

In her succinct overview of the *Kitchen Prayer Series*, Freda Scott Giles offers the following comments: “The performance became an effort to process the disaster. . . The event became a communal meditation on a shared traumatic experience. The immediacy of theatrical time, combined with closeness of the audience to the event in time, melded in a unique way” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 143). It is important to note, as Giles does, the timing of when *Performance Dialogue* was first produced. As I mention earlier in the chapter, Dickerson’s trilogy – initiating with *Performance Dialogue* – is one of the earliest illustrations of a post-9/11 theatre. And because of her focus on women,

particularly Black women and other women of color from primarily third world countries, Dickerson is also one of the first – if not the first – to dramatize the anxieties caused by the effects of 9/11 while at the same time bringing attention to oppressed and marginalized voices globally.

With my analysis, therefore, I contend that Dickerson constructs a Black feminist intervention into post-9/11 theatre as she “enter the Black women’s voice as a metaphor for all women and oppressed people” (Fathom). Dickerson expresses that “the universal is found in the particular, but it is usually the white particular that stands for universality.” As such, she asserts that “the black woman’s particular experience is particular enough to be as universal as, say *Death of a Salesman*” (Fathom). To her declaration, I argue that Dickerson inverts the white standard of universality by dramatizing the effects of 9/11 through the “particular experiences” of lens of Black women and other global women.

Like many of Dickerson’s previous works, *Kitchen Prayer: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* opens in a highly ritualistic, ceremonial manner. It might serve well to think of the play’s opening as a prologue. The cast enters the stage to the sound of drums as the lights fade-up. Dressed in all-black attire, the prayerful performers march into the space as if they were a part of a funerary procession. After entering the stage, each cast member walks to her assigned seat which is accompanied by a music stand that holds their scripts. The prayerful performers do not sit. Dickerson enters and meets Lisa centerstage. Facing each other, Lisa hands Dickerson a rainstick which seems to double as a talking stick or a speaker’s staff. With Lisa handing Dickerson the talking stick, this seems to further suggest that Dickerson is charged with

leading the circle of storytelling. It could be inferred that Dickerson assumes the role of a mother griot figure or cult priestess. Lisa takes her place beside her chair. Dickerson walks upstage and stands next to her seat which is higher than the seats of the prayerful performers. Dickerson's seat is located upstage center with three prayerful performers located on either side of her. Dickerson thumps the staff on the floor once, the drumming ceases. She thumps it a second time and the prayerful performers chant segments of Langston Hughes' blues poem "Bound No'th Blues":

Goin' down the road, Lawd,  
Goin' down the road.  
Down the road, Lawd,  
Way, way down the road.  
Got to find somebody  
To help me carry this load.

Road's in front o' me,  
Nothin' to do but walk.  
Road's in front of me,  
Walk...an' walk...an' walk.  
I'd like to meet a good friend  
To come along an' talk.

Road, road, road, O!  
Road, road...road...road, road!  
Road, road, road, O!  
On the no'thern road.  
These Mississippi towns ain't  
Fit fer a hoppin' toad.

Dickerson once again thumps the talking stick, this time signaling for the prayerful performers to sit. By incorporating the poem Dickerson heedfully employs the blues aesthetic, a signature trope within African American drama. According to Houston A. Barker, the blues aesthetic is a blend of "work songs, group seculars, field hollers, sacred harmonies, proverbial wisdom, folk philosophy, political commentary, ribald humor,

elegiac lament, and much more” (*Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature* 5). In short, the blues serves as an anecdotal entryway into the complexities of Black life.

According to James Smethurst, scholar of the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement, *Bound No'th Blues* centers on a “Black narrator who rejects his former life in the South and surrenders himself to the uncertainty and cultural dislocation of the immigrant on the ‘northern road’” (“The Strong Men Gittin Stronger” 70). Similarly, Langston Hughes scholar C. James Trotman writes, “It is another moaning blues that makes noticeable use of repetition to create pace and mood, and the theme of wondering along in the world down some interminable road is common in blues lyrics” (*Langston Hughes: The Man, His Art, and His Continuing Influence* 59). According to Angela Y. Davis, the idea of “travel” is quite synonymous with the blues tradition. In discussing the blues aesthetic within a Black feminist context, Davis asserts that “For women especially, the ability to travel implied a measure of autonomy, an ability to shun passivity and acquiescence in the face of mistreatment and injustice and to exercise some control over the circumstances of their lives. . .” (*Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* 74). In thinking about Dickerson’s own repertoire of adaptations and dramatic revisions, one observes Dickerson reimagined the blues poem to symbolize Black women who find themselves on a lonely road of escape from devastating realities, thus traveling to newer possibilities.

Furthermore, in thinking about the blues aesthetic as a form of “elegiac lament,” the recitation of Hughes’ poem conversely doubles as a commemoration of celebrated actress Gloria Foster. According to Giles, each of Dickerson’s performance dialogues are accompanied by a ritual in which she honors a woman who has died prior to the year’s performance (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 142). Therefore, it comes as no surprise that

Dickerson would pay homage to Foster as she died two weeks following the September 11 attacks. In honoring Foster, Dickerson materializes her commitment to *The Project* as she celebrates Black women by shedding light on those who may not be known to a widespread audience (142). Dickerson speaks directly to the audience:

Gloria Foster immortalized this poem in the 1968 Broadway show *A Hand is on the Gate*.<sup>30</sup> We begin with it this afternoon because we are here to honor Ms. Foster. When one celebrates Gloria Foster, one thinks first of the powerful words that critics have used to describe her: fierce, passionate, magnificent, compelling, majestic, full-voiced, a thunderbolt.

The prayerful performers chime in “Road, Road, Road, Road.” Dickerson continues “Gloria Foster, a distinguished stage actress who portrayed generations of African American characters in plays like *In White America* and *Having Our Say*, died on September 30 at her home in Manhattan. She was 64.” In this moment, “road” is symbolic of the lengthy trail that is Foster’s career in which she was mostly like met with the harsh realities of racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Dickerson continues: “No immediate family members survive.” The prayerful performers chime in once again: “I wish I had a good friend to come along and talk.” Dickerson repeats the line: “I wish I had a good friend to come along and talk.” The intermingling of the poem with Dickerson’s speech substantiates the “elegiac lament” and begins to take shape of an ancestral worship. Ancestral worship – understood here as a West African Yoruba tradition (particularly among the Egungun culture) – is the conjuring of a deceased person who was revered by the community. In conjuring the ancestor, the community recognizes the spirit as a force who can provide safety and direction. Dickerson affirms Foster as an ancestor, as one whom will guide the prayerful performers: “On this three-

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<sup>30</sup> *A Hand is on the Gate* premiered off-Broadway in 1966.

month anniversary of September 11, we turn to Gloria Foster to honor victims of global loss through their own stories.” When the women tell their stories of 9/11, Gloria Foster, as ancestor, takes the place of their “good friend” who will “come along an’ talk.”

In the next moment of the prologue, Dickerson acquaints her audience with one of her most familiar traits incorporated in many of her dramatic works: storytelling. “From the moment we discovered fire, we have gathered together to tell each other the same stories over and over. Today, we have a new terrible tale. And it is very old.” She goes on to infer Greek theatre as a paradigm that frames the performance as she quotes from Aeschylus’ tragedy *Agamemnon*: “We who learn must suffer.” The remaining prayerful performers chant the latter quote three times and continue with the following lines: “And then in our sleep, pain which cannot forget, falls drop by drop upon the heart until in our own despair, against our will, comes wisdom through the awful grace of God.” Dickerson states an interview with Fathom that she includes Greek myths within her work because “the language of oppression is the same the world over.” Dickerson asserts that the language of oppression can be understood whether it is a Greek tale, African Tale, or the story of slavery, because they “contain all of the elements of modern day suffering and anguish. You can find one that speaks to the moment” (Fathom).

*Performance Dialogue* is framed through the Greek story of Niobe. “Niobe, who arrogantly boasted of her children, angered the gods, who cut them down and turned her into a weeping stone. Niobe came to represent the United States” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu 143). Like Niobe, each of the women finds herself in mourning as they witness the death of America’s children. In further thinking about Dickerson’s use of classic Greek theatre as a paradigm, I am intrigued with the idea that the collective of voices

within the trilogy are reflective of a Greek chorus, each telling a portion of the story of 9/11 and its aftermath.

The performance transitions into a focus of 9/11 with the commencing of the prayerful performers sharing their accounts of where they were on the morning of September 11, 2001. Glenda Dickerson recounts: “At 9:10 in the morning I am merely out of my mind,” as she frantically searches for her daughter. Dickerson recollects:

I know that at this time of the morning my daughter is on the A train  
underneath the twin towers.  
I watch the second plane hit. I scream and call again.  
I watch the first tower fall. I wail and call again.  
The second tower falls. They’re gone. But where is Anitra?

Dickerson bemoans that when she attempts to contact Anitra “at home, at work, on her cell,” it was “all to no avail.” She states: “I know this is a moment I will never forget.”

Dickerson sets the tone for the remainder of the prayerful performer’s recollections of the dreadful day. Before inviting the performers to speak, Dickerson formally welcomes to the audience to what she calls “the elegiac dialogue,” signifying that the evening’s performance will be, a moment of lamentation through performance and shared discourse.

When Dickerson concludes her welcome address to the audience, she prompts the prayerful performers to revive their stories. Dickerson asks: “Lisa, where were you on 9/11?” Lisa shares that “it was a bright and clear day” as she was on a train heading into Manhattan. “Blue skies become fire skies. Everybody runs to the left side of the train, faces glued to the glass windows. I feel unsafe.” Lisa exits the train at Time Square only to find panic in the street. As she explains, everyone is seeking information to explain what they were witnessing. After arriving to work, Lisa discovers that one of the Twin

Towers had been crashed into by an airplane. “I feel unsafe,” she restates. She decides to leave work, but realizing “going back to Brooklyn was not an option.” She heads uptown to a friend’s apartment. “We sit in the kitchen. We eat our food. Food is comforting. I feel safe.”

Walonda learned of the mayhem while on her way to school when a “wild-eye man ran into the corner store screaming terror and panic.” Dismissing the man’s cries at first, she soon realized something terrible was indeed happening while listening to the radio in her car. “Planes were down. Planes couldn’t come down, and the President was on the move.” Prayerful performer Tanya recalls watching the towers fall on the television in a restaurant on Fulton street in New York. After she “watched the second plane hit tower two” she decided that home was probably the safest place to be. Tanya enters her home only to find “7 flashes on my answering machine.” Tanya shares:

It finally clicked.  
I fell to my knees and cried.  
I called my parent’s home expecting to leave a message.  
I was shocked to get my mother’s voice.

Like Dickerson’s frantic search for her daughter, Tanya’s parents were also waiting for their daughter’s call. Although relieved to speak with her mother and reassure her that she was indeed safe, Tanya is reluctant to rejoice when she discloses, “I think to myself: wow! What if they were waiting for a call that could’ve never come.”

Rhonda states that “for a split second she felt panic,” when she noticed her mother calling on the telephone. Admittedly, Rhonda posed the familiar question that arises when receiving a sudden telephone call: “Who died?” Her mother informs her of the national disaster: “They’ve bombed the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.” Rhonda immediately turns on the television to witness “the two towers in flames. People jumping

from high floors.” With the same panic as some of the other prayerful performers, Rhonda urgently thought of friends who may have been endangered:

I grabbed my phone to find my friends in New York.  
A man answers the phone.  
May I speak to Marla Shapiro?  
She hasn't worked here for a year.  
Do I call her mother?  
Does she know what happened?  
Will I panic her?  
I decide to call.

Like Dickerson, Tanya, and Rhonda, Sandra is also concerned for folks in New York: “I called my daughter. We thought of Sonji, her cousin in New York who flies for Northwest.” “We must find Sonji,” she bemoans. Sandra’s testimony, however, shifts from personal lamentation to political critique when she says: “I was glued to the TV for the rest of the day, angry with George W., wondering ‘What did he know and when did he know it!’ This would not have happened with Bill.” Clearly, Sandra is making a distinction between the two presidencies of George W. Bush and William (Bill) Clinton, thus implying that the current administration was perhaps more informed about the attacks than they were sharing with the public. It is interesting to note that the laughter from the audience was quite audible after Sandra made the latter remark. Although the audience’s political affiliations and varying responses and opinions regarding 9/11 are unknown, the laughter suggests a communal moment of agreement, or at the very least a similar critique about President George W. Bush.

Denise’s experience is quite different than the others. She somberly shares that she found herself amid the chaos. After telephoning her mother and closest friends to ensure their safety, her telephone line goes dead. Denise tells the audience that she goes outside only to find “hundreds of dust-covered zombies are walking uptown in dead

silence.” Although “numb,” she admits to feeling “protected,” as she did not suffer the horrendous act like the walking zombies. Denise begins to walk with the zombies until she finds an empty bus where the driver was urging her to board: “The driver said, ‘we going uptown. Next stop, Harlem’.”

In the next moment of the performance, Dickerson breaks the fourth wall as she poses a centralizing question to the audience: “Do you remember where you were on 9/11?” Amid the audience members sharing their stories, Dickerson leaves her seat and walks to the apron of the stage as if to make a bridge between the prayerful performers and the audience. She speaks directly to them: “Does anyone else want to say where they were on 9/11?” The audience’s commentary is quite inaudible in addition to several of the audience members being out of view of the camera.

Although I am unable to provide a fuller synopsis of what was shared by the audience members, this moment is still quite important as it actuates one of the goals of *The Project* which is to place “responsive narratives of the audience” alongside the performance. In posing this question to the audience, Dickerson “took the audience from the position of the spectator to the position of witness” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 143). In other words, the enthusiastic audience members are no longer simply spectators of a theatrical/dramatic performance, but as witnesses of 9/11, and through the sharing of their own personal narratives they have taken on a third role: the role of participant. Whether one considers this moment in the performance to be a “communal meditation” (Giles) or a “civic forum” (Friedman), it is most important to note that what emerges from this moment is the unfolding of a newly formed community; a community that crosses boundaries of gender, race, age, and other identity markers. This newly formed

community is substantiated when Dickerson returns to her seat and proclaims: “We are all at ground zero.” Each of the prayerful performer repeats: “We are all at ground zero.”

With the next phase of the performance Dickerson and the prayerful performers memorialize those who have lost their lives during the ruckus of 9/11. The memorializing begins with a focus on Yvette Anderson, a 53-year-old Black woman who was in the World Trade Center in tower one on the 87<sup>th</sup> floor during the attack. Prayerful performer Walonda reads an editorial written by journalist Debra J. Dickerson, “The first plane struck the World Trade Center at 8:48am, and that mean that lots of working people were among the dead – people who pour coffee and mop floors and stock toilet paper in the bathroom.” Dickerson touts, “This is the story of such a woman, Yvette Anderson.” Employed as a keyboard specialist in the World Trade Center, Yvette Anderson was also a college student planning to graduate that following May with her bachelor’s degree in hotel and restaurant management with a dream to open a restaurant upon graduation.

Dickerson eulogizes her:

Here are dishes Yvette Anderson might have served someday in her dream restaurant: corn pudding, barbecued chicken, fried chicken, turkey wings, collard greens mixed with kale, banana pudding, lemon meringue pie, peach cobbler. And her daughter’s favorite, yellow and green squash with onions. On the night of Sept. 10, she braided her daughter’s hair, saying, ‘I don’t know why, but I have a nervous feeling.’

Yvette Anderson is exemplar of women whom Dickerson calls the “drylongso,” that is, the everyday, ordinary people. Subsequently, then, Yvette Anderson’s story epitomizes the other Black women whose names and stories may have been lost and forgotten with the falling of the Twin Towers. Case in point, Thomas Ross maintains that “9/11 changed the nation and the world, forever, at least in the collective imagination of White America. . . Although the victims of 9/11 were not all White, the essential face of the victims was

White (“Whiteness After 9/11” 235). Likewise, social scientist Marysia Zalewski asserts that “a fresh bloodied site of injury surfaced from the ashes of ground zero: whiteness. An injured whiteness wrapped up in innocence, morality and racial purity” (“Thinking Feminism and Race Through the War in Terror” 314). Whiteness, according to Ross and Zalewski, is supposedly a privileged space of safety. 9/11, however, destabilized this assumed safety in whiteness. Therefore, the media attention that centered on the victims and survivors of 9/11 primarily covered those who were to be protected because of their whiteness. Yvette Anderson’s story along with the personal narratives presented by the prayerful performers, however, is another example of inverting “white universality” through the “particular experiences” of these Black women.

In the following segment, the prayerful performers shift their focus from strictly women to a focus on Black male firefighters who were involved in the rescue efforts. The performers conjure their words:

Sandra: These are the things that my dreams bring back to me.

Lisa: Mama, there are body parts all over the place. I’m walking on body parts. I don’t want to go back.

Tanya: I’m not new to death, but this experience makes me know I could never do any other job.

Denise: If I have to stay here for a year or two, hunting for that solitary item that will give one family peace, then that’s what I’ll do.

Walonda: Fathers digging for sons, sons digging for fathers. Brothers digging for other brothers.

Rhonda: A warped credit card, a charred photograph, a human bone protruding from torn fabric. Anything that will identify one of the five thousand dead. Anything that will give a distraught family the material proof of a life now lost.

By honoring Black firefighters and other uniformed rescue workers, *Performance Dialogue* actively animates a major tenet of womanist theory: a concern for the entirety of the community, including that of Black men. Newspapers and other news sources championed the efforts of rescue workers—specifically firefighters—in the weeks after 9/11. Walonda reads from a newspaper clipping, “The United States has always had its heroes – those who won the war of independence, cowboys, railway-builders, baseball players. But since 11 September, firefighters have become the nation’s new idol.” Interestingly, the professions listed by Walonda not only symbolize America’s fascination with heroes, but if further gesture towards an enchantment with an archetypal characteristic of heroism: whiteness. Ross, in his discussion of 9/11 and whiteness, asserts that the victims fell into two groups, that is, “the heroes, the firefighters and police, and the innocent victims, the business people trapped in the twin towers” (236). Ross maintains, however, that the face of both groups including the firefighter heroes was “overwhelmingly white.” *Performance Dialogue*, however, sheds light on Black firefighters, police officers, and other uniformed personnel who were active during the aftermath of 9/11. In doing so, furthermore, *Performance Dialogue* complicates the historic and cultural narrative that only white men are heroes.

To commemorate the Black fighters and other uniformed rescue workers, the prayerful performers collectively sing the folk-turned-spiritual song “We are Soldiers in the Army” while simultaneously reciting the “Litany of Firefighters,” a list of names of Black fighter fighters who died while working during the disaster: William Harry Thomspson, Uhuru Houston, Nathaniel Webb, Walwyn Stuart, Andre’ Fletcher, Tarel Coleman, Clinton Davis, Vernon Paul Cherry, Rodney Gillis, Leon Smith, Jr. The

“Litany of Firefighters” was performed in both the December 11, 2001 performance as well as the May 19, 2002 performance. In the 2001 performance, only the list of names is recorded in the script and recited during the performance. In the second performance, however, the act of commemoration is taken a step further when the prayerful performers would evoke the name of a firefighter and then display a newspaper article that highlights the firefighters’ heroic efforts while simultaneously memorialize their deaths. The prayerful performers conclude the act by reading a passage – usually a quote from a family member or fellow firefighter – from the newspaper article.

After honoring the firefighters, Dickerson performs a monologue where she expresses that although she eventually located her daughter – who was safe and unharmed – she still mourned for what her daughter had to witness. Dickerson likens 9/11 to some of the acts of mayhem she experienced during the 1960s Civil Rights

Movements:

My heart still aches for her, for her whole generation, for our students, for some of the young women on this stage. They never had to see the terrible pictures that inform my life. The Jim Crow Signs. The dogs and hoses. The little girls in Birmingham. Vietnam: the black and white television war. The martyrs cut down. Kennedy in mid-smile. King in the midst of exhortation. These are the pictures that took our innocence the first time. And now our children must grow up, shockingly, must grow up & old in an instant. America has wondered carefree for their whole lives but now their carefree days are ended.

Dickerson’s monologue is a segue into the following segment which takes on quite a political tone, thus harkening back to Colleran and Spencer’s notion of political theatre being activated through the concepts of “interrogation” and “critique.” Through her comparison of 9/11 with horrendous acts that occurred during the Civil Rights Movement, Dickerson initiates a critique of America’s own complicit behaviors

regarding domestic acts of terror and devastation. To that point, in stating that “America has wandered carefree for their whole lives” she indicts America for not acknowledging nor reconciling their own histories of domestic terrorism with regards to Black American lives. In broadening this viewpoint, Dickerson and the prayerful performers evoke a host of interrogative and critical remarks in response to the ways in which the U.S. government intended to respond to the attacks.

Accordingly, this segment of the performance is titled “Patriotism: The Splendid Experiment.” The segment is framed by the following questions: “What is an American?” and “What is American patriotism?” Tanya questions, as a Black American, whether or not she’s “better off than a Black in England? Or a Black in Spain?” Rhonda proclaims that she will “criticize government policies” because she “will not ingest the creamy smooth of America we are force fed. I am patriotic because I criticize.” Rhonda’s statement echoes similar sentiments of a statement made by James Baldwin in his essay, “Autobiographical Notes.” Baldwin writes, “I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually” (9). Like Baldwin, Rhonda recognizes the necessity to criticize America for it is precisely America who has shaped her subjective identity. Sandra’s response is in the same spirit as Rhonda’s, expressing that “An American is the person who respects the ideals of this country, but who can see that not everyone lives these ideals.” Sandra maintains, however, that even when “pain is great,” one must still ask: “would you really rather be somewhere else?” Walonda states, “this country mistreated my ancestors,” and therefore she finds her patriotism “enigmatic.” Denise contends that patriotism is not “flag-waving and barbeques. It’s not Fourth of July picnics and parades and it’s not blonde hair, blue-

eyed apple pie.” She rehearses the question: “What is an American.” Cynical in her response, Denise retorts, “A K-mart shopper? A stockbroker? A baseball player? The homeless man I have my last dollar to this morning? My local congressman? My local crackhead?” “It’s all the above,” she responds, affirming the very diversity that is American culture. She closes, “by birth I am an American. I am what American looks like.”

For one to suggest that the remarks made by the prayerful performers were an affront to American patriotism would be too easy of a statement to infer; the performers remarks were much more complex. What one captures from the statements made by the prayerful performers is one of both appreciation as well as criticism. That is, the prayerful performers appreciate the diversity and liberties that come with being an American; yet, at the same time they are also critical of America’s paradoxes, particularly when it comes to their gendered and racial identities. In this sense, their expressions of American identity and patriotism echoes what Dickerson indicated when she expressed that through the “particular experiences” of Black women, “We define ourselves and we define America for you through ourselves” (Fathom).

In succession with the prayerful performers answering the question of what it means to be an American/what it means to display American patriotism, Dickerson recites quotes from noted Black female activists. These women include Black feminist activist Angela Davis, journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault, Black feminist writer Rebecca Walker, and Ruth J. Simmons, president of Brown University. The words of the abovementioned women collectively oblige the audience to reflect on what it means to consider the devastation of terror, war, and trauma beyond American borders. Placing

real Black women at the center of her creative work is a longstanding trope for Dickerson.<sup>31</sup>

Returning to *Performance Dialogue*, the words of journalist Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Black feminist author Rebecca Walker perhaps best summarize the collective views behind the quotes excerpted in the performance. Dickerson narrates:

Charlayne Hunter-Gault: Americans have been led to believe what they see on television. They believe the pictures showing that their worlds begins and ends at their borders, and they assume that whatever else is out there doesn't matter.

Rebecca Walker: Stripped of our naivete, relegated finally to what we are, citizens of the world, we may be moved to think more deeply about the impact of our actions on our brothers and sisters from Beirut to Belize, from Birmingham to Bombay.

This segment of *Performance Dialogue* concludes with the words of Congresswoman Barbara Lee. Walonda reads:

Mr. Speaker, I rise today with a heavy heart, one that is filled with sorrow for the families and loved ones who were killed and injured in New York, Virginia, and Pennsylvania. Only the most foolish for the most callous would not understand the grief that has gripped the American people and millions across the world. This unspeakable attack on the United States has forced me to rely on my moral compass, my conscience, and my God for direction. September 11 changed the world. Our deepest fears now haunt us. Yet I am convinced that military action will not prevent further acts of international terrorism against the United States. I have agonized over this vote.

The excerpt above comes from Lee's speech made on the floor of the House of Representatives on September 14, 2001, in which she was the sole member to vote "no" on the Authorization for Use of Military Force Against Terrorists because she believed that the Authorization would (and subsequently did) allow the United States to have free

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<sup>31</sup> Lisa Anderson, author of *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama*, notes how Dickerson and co-author Breena Clarke place Black women's history at the center of their play *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (48-52). I discuss *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* in Chapter Four.

access to attack—thus igniting a war—any country they believed to have been involved in the 9/11 attacks. Lee expressed in her speech made to the House of Representatives that she felt a vote of “yes” would guarantee “a blank check to the president to attack anyone involved in the Sept. 11 events—anywhere, in any country, without regard to our nation’s long-term foreign policy, economic and national security interests, and without time limit. . . . A rush to launch precipitous military counterattacks runs too great a risk that more innocent men, women, children will be killed” (“Why I opposed the Resolution to Authorize Force” 279-280)

Congresswoman Barbara Lee’s stance against the brewing War on Terror was undeniably a feminist-womanist stance. In fact, the same sentiment applies to all the above women who voiced concerns about the coming war and the consequences it would reap for people across the world. Thus, to include their voices in the performance further situates *Performance Dialogue* as a black feminist intervention into post-9/11 theatre. Additionally, their viewpoints speak to the larger history of Black women activists, political strategists, cultural workers, and educators whose work and efforts towards just causes went beyond the U.S. borders.

As the performance comes near the end, *Performance Dialogue* sheds light on the turbulent conditions that women face around the world daily. In an interview, Dickerson states that

. . . while we are focusing on these caves trying to locate Bin Laden, women are being raped and killed in Rwanda, Sudan, Sierra Leone. Women are starving themselves to death in Turkey. All these stories that are happening just do not come to surface. Some have reported that in Pakistan the rape of women has become so common that it has another: it’s call “lying down” – implying that you just lie down and take it. Another quotation is, “Rape is so common; it is more common than the bite of a mosquito.” Those are the stories I have to tell no matter what. I

want to tell these stories, but I also want to include the voice of the women who are working and fighting against these kinds of oppression, because you never hear about them either. (Fathom)

As Dickerson laments, “This is happening all over the world” (Fathom). Before closing the show, for instance, the prayerful performers tell a story about a woman in Kabul named Sohalia. Dickerson reads:

One Friday afternoon, 30,000 men and boys poured into a dilapidated Olympic sports stadium in Kabul, capital of Afghanistan. Hawkers peddled nuts, biscuits and tea to the crowd. These circuses have been weekly gatherings for the entertainment starved males of Kabul. The scheduled entertainment? A young woman named Sohalia was going to be flogged. Her crime? She was walking with a man who wasn't a relative.

The choice to elucidate the oppressive conditions of women around the world initiates what I contend is a transnational feminist praxis thru performance—a concept I will address in detail within the following chapter. For now, suffice it to say that I use the notion of transnational feminism to frame how Dickerson's work transgress U.S. borders, thus animating how the effects of war, gendered oppression, and other acts of terrorism – be they committed by foreign or domestic parties – are experienced globally.

*Kitchen Prayer: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* closes with a distinguished poem, “For My People,” by Chicago Black Renaissance writer Margaret Walker (1915-1998). By way of a final prayer or meditation, the poem speaks about people, “all the faces, all the adams and eves, and the countless generations,” who are trying to make sense of the world's chaos. The poem expresses the following:

Let a new earth arise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky. Let a second generation full of courage issue forth; let a people loving freedom come to growth. Let a beauty full of healing and a strength of final clenching be the pulsing in our spirits and our blood. Let a new earth arise. Let another world be born. Let a bloody peace be written in the sky.

Dickerson and the prayerful performers take their cue from Walker's poem. The hopes and demands articulated within the poem are achievable, but first the world must speak its truth and reconcile with its past and present terrors.

### **Conclusion: Black Women Playwrights and War Plays**

While Dickerson may have been one of the first Black women playwrights to dramatize the anxieties of 9/11 and its aftermath, in doing so she joins a legacy of Black women playwrights who have written about war since the turn of the twentieth-century. One of the goal of this analysis, then, is to place Glenda Dickerson alongside other Black women playwrights that have written what is dubbed as "war plays." Thus, my project aims to address a dearth in dramatic criticism by expanding the relatively small body of literature that illustrates how Black women playwrights have made a Black feminist intervention into a mostly white, and predominantly male, dominated arena. As Marilyn Elkin notes, "African American women have insisted in raising their voices in protest against the wars in African American [and world] history and on demonstrating their ability to write about such forbidden subjects" (56). Black women playwrights, moreover, have broadened the scope of what constitutes a war play. Many war plays by Black women playwrights go beyond dramatizing action on the battle ground. Some of them illustrate the impact that war has on soldiers and their families such as the effects of post-traumatic stress disorder These works include Alice Dunbar Nelson's *Mine Eyes Have Seen* (1918), Mary P. Burrill's *Aftermath* (1919), May Miller's *Stragglers in the Dust* (1930), Lorraine Hansberry's *The Drinking Gourd* (1960), Adrienne Kennedy's *A Rat's Mass* (1967), Ntozake shange's *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* (1976), Anna Deavere Smith's *Piano* (1989), Lynn Nottage's *Ruined*

(2008) and *The Odds* (2011), Janine Nabers *Black Girl Gone* (2011), and Suzan-Lori Parks' *Father Comes Home from the Wars* (2015).

Additionally, Black women playwrights who write about war have also expounded on what constitutes war through their works. Whereas the term war typically denotes a battle between two or more distinct territories, Black women playwrights have use the term to include and address racial terrors and racism, inner-city/inter-cultural strife, and warring among different ethnic groups, among other topics.

As a collective, these Black women playwrights “have produced vital and challenging works of theatre and performance that address a wide range of pressing social and political problems for women, touching the local and the global” (Aston and Harris 12). Moreover, they have “challenged gendered terrains” particularly as they’ve “given voice to those often silenced or ignored in official stories by politicians and the mass media” (Friedman 115). With her project, Glenda Dickerson presents a remarkable narrative in American history while simultaneously challenging us to rethink the ideals surrounding “what” and “who” is American—especially where Black women are concerned.

## Chapter Three

### Staging Transnational Feminism in *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer*

#### Introduction

In the previous chapter I introduced *The Project of Transforming Thru Performing: Re/placing Black Womanly Images*. In doing so, I began exploring Dickerson's dramatic trilogy, the *Kitchen Prayer Series*, a trio of plays that were inspired by the events of 9/11. In this chapter, I examine the following play within the trilogy: *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer*. My analysis of this performance piece picks up where the previous play (and, subsequently, the previous chapter) leaves off. For instance, at the end of *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* Dickerson begins to dramatize the ways in which terror and oppression are gendered acts of war that cross geographic borders. *Identities on Trial* continues that exploration by centralizing the narratives of women who may be distanced geographically but are connected through similar acts of oppression.

*Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer* was staged April 10, 2003 as part of the closing events for the University of Michigan's Center for World Performance Studies' 2003 Distinguished Lecture/Performance Series, "Identities on Trial: Performing Constitutions and Global Citizenship."<sup>32</sup> The other events included a public lecture,

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<sup>32</sup> The lecture/series took place February 10 – April 11, 2003. According to *Theatre at Michigan*, an annual news periodical produced by University of Michigan's theatre department, this was the first lecture/performance series produced under Dickerson's role as director of The Center for World Performance Studies. "The series presented Joseph Roach, the Charles C. & Dorathea S. Dilley Professor of Theater at Yale University; Mbala Nkanga, Professor of Theatre & Drama, University of Michigan; Eleanor T aylor, professor of English, Howard University; Haiping Yan, Center for World Performance Studies Scholarin-Residence; and Ama Ata Aidoo, prize-winning Ghanaian playwright" (5).

“Women, the Nation of Wholeness and Identity in African Performance,” delivered by Ghanaian feminist playwright, writer, and activist Ama Ata Aidoo on April 9, 2003. The final event, held April 11, 2003, was a public interview with Aidoo followed by a festival of scenes from her works.

A description of the lecture/performance series printed in the program guide reads as follows:

Engaging the current sea change of globalization, the internationally prominent playwrights, performance artists, and scholars of Performance Studies featured in this series interrogate the current state of crisis on its many urgent fronts with diverse cultural, social, and political perspectives. “Trial” is a layered term that includes notion of ordeals (“trials and tribulations”), experimentation (a “trial run”), or legal action (“trial by jury”). The distinguished lectures, scholarly symposium, and performance events in this series address the multiple nuances of this concept with specific topics ranging from transnational performances of justice, constitutional democracy and citizenship, to putting the organizational rubrics of the academy and the role of the intellectual “on trial,” to historical formations or improvisations of institutional and personal identity in crisis. Bringing in different aspects and memories of global histories by its speakers and performers, this series raises a set of internationally informed theoretical questions about transformations of identities with a range of performative responses to those questions.<sup>33</sup>

While the description in its entirety contextualizes the intellectual and activist-centered impetus that undergirds the symposium, I find that a portion of the description explicitly captures the crux of *Identities on Trial*. Specifically, I am referring to the following two phrases: “transnational performances” and “global histories.” Together, these terms indicate a crossing, or rather a penetration of national borders through acts of performances that center globally-diverse histories. In clearer terms related to Dickerson’s artistic mission, the two phrases symbolize her aim of moving beyond the

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<sup>33</sup> The program guide was included with the script. In all likelihood, it was Glenda Dickerson who authored the description in the program guide. I make this claim because Dickerson was director of the Center for World Performance Studies at the time the of the lecture/performance studies.

borders of the United States through the dramatization of women's multifarious histories and encounters with war, rape, genital mutilation, colonialism, enslavement, and genocide.

The performance script for *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer* was conceived from three main sources. The first of these are the testimonies given during the World Conference Against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance (WCAR) held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. The WCAR is one of many meetings organized around "international meetings of heads of states and leaders of government" (Raj v) that are deeply invested in ensuring that women from around the world are guaranteed a space to voice their issues and concerns as it relates to acts of racial and gendered discrimination. During the conference, the Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL), a feminist-activist centered program at Rutgers University, sponsored a hearing: *The Intersection of Women's Human Rights and Racism and Related Intolerances*. A description of the hearing is as follows:

The hearing provided insights and a deeper understanding of the compounding negative effects of race, gender, and other categories of identities on our human rights. And it highlighted some of the organizing for change that women around the world are engaged in doing. (Raj v)

The testimonies delivered during the hearing are from a host of women from varying places such as Nepal, Serbia, Bangladesh, Malaysia, Palestine, Republic of Congo, and the United States of America. The testimonies were later transcribed and published as a collection in *Women at the Intersection: Indivisible Rights, Identities, and Oppressions*. It is this publication where Dickerson pulls many of the stories she dramatizes in *Identities on Trial*. At the title of the publication suggests, the lives of the women who delivered

testimonies at the WCAR are shaped by class, race, gender, ethnicity, and other identity markers.

The second source used to conceive the script for *Identities on Trial* are also personal testimonies taken from the Summary of Findings from the Women's International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese military Sexual Slavery. Held December 8-12, 2000, the tribunal was coordinated by the Violence Against Women in War-Network Japan so that officials could investigate criminal activities in the manner of sexual assault committed against women by the Japanese military in the Asia Pacific region during the 1930s and 1940s. The regions include North Korea, South Korea, China, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Taiwan, Malaysia, East Timor, and the Netherlands. A Major goal of the tribunal is stated as follows:

This tribunal was established out of the conviction that these failures must not be allowed to silence the voices of survivors, nor obscure accountability for such crimes against humanity. It was established to redress the historic tendency to trivialize, excuse, marginalize and obfuscate crimes against women, particularly sexual crimes, and even more so when they are committed against non-white women. Finally, this Tribunal was established out of the conviction, expressed over and over again by the brave yet tormented survivors in the latter stages of their lives, that acknowledging and assigning responsibility for the crimes committed against them will help to ensure that they live out their remaining years in peace. (*Summary of Findings* 11).

The “failures” that the tribunal was aiming to address refers to the 10 years of attempts to make public and rectify “the Japanese military’s institutionalization of rape, sexual slavery, trafficking, torture and other forms of sexual violence inflicted upon an estimated minimum of 200,000 girls and women” (*Summary of Findings* 1-2). For instance, the first lawsuit for damages and compensation was filed in 1991. Unsuccessful, the lawsuit was followed by the issue being raised in 1992 at the United Nations Commission on Human

Rights, and then being raised once again at the 1993 Vienna World Conference on Human Rights. While these previous events brought the event to public attention, there was little to no rectification or expression of remorse. International Law scholar Christine Chinkin provides an overview of how the tribunal came about:

Frustrated by this lack of effective response and aware that time is running out for them, survivors have looked to other avenues for redress. The tribunal arose out of the work of various women's nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) across Asia. [. . .] The preparations for the tribunal then became an international process, while remaining based in Asia. Preparatory conferences were held in Tokyo in December 1998 and in Seoul in February 1999, where the International Organizing Committee for the tribunal was formed. (Women's International Tribunal 336).

The tribunal was a decade-long culmination of trying to repair a turbulent situation.

The final source used to conceive *Identities on Trial* was the collection of essays and creative writings from *Women on War: An International Anthology of Writings from Antiquity to the Present*, edited by poet, essayist, and performer Daniella Gioseffi. These writings are from a diverse host of women who contest acts of war and instead call for peace. The poems, manifestoes, and narratives collected in the anthology that Dickerson employs for her play offer a nice balance to the testimonies pulled from the tribunals. While the reflective writings and narratives may offer gruesome details of sexual exploitation, effects of war, and other horrid occurrences, collectively the stories exemplify how women—from around the world and across time and space—search for ample methods to fight, resist, and survive.

The sources that are performed, specifically the testimonies from the WCAR and other narratives, are not performed in their entirety. In other words, the texts that the prayerful performers embody are extracted from lengthier documents. Although I name

and provide background context on the sources above from which Dickerson fashions the script for *Identities on Trial*, I want to acknowledge, in the spirit of transparency, that I was only privy to the sources, and therefore learned of Dickerson's dramaturgical strategy as a result of retrieving the scripts from the Kitchen Prayers Peace archive housed in the Labadie Collection in the Special Collections Library at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Thus, I would not have learned of this discernment in only watching the recorded performance. The unprocessed script I retrieved primarily consisted of xeroxed pages of the original sources from which the performed script emanates. I was able to discern the performed dialogues because of handwritten marks to denote the text used for the performance. Accordingly, having access to the scripts provided me with a greater entryway to read, understand, and contextualize each narrative within its larger framework.

The process of reading and contextualizing the script in this way brought about a concern. I am concerned with what gets lost by extracting certain texts of the narratives versus others. This makes one wonder if the audience who watched the performance were able to grasp the larger situation in which the narratives aimed to depict? It could be suggested, then, that certain moments throughout the play could have been a bit more contextualized had Dickerson included more texts from the lengthier document. What is apparent, however, is that the thematic thread which connects each narrative is women and global forms of oppression. As such, my analysis illustrates what is gained by combining the narratives in this way.

***Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer as Transnational Feminist Praxis***

In discussing the trilogy in general, Glenda Dickerson asserts that she dramatizes these stories because they did not receive much attention in the media. As quoted in the previous chapter, Dickerson states, “All these stories that are happening just do not come to the surface” (Fathom). Dickerson continues: “Some have reported that in Pakistan that rape of women has become so common that it has another name: it’s called “lying down” – implying that you just lie down and take it. Another quotation is, ‘Rape is more common than the bite of a mosquito’” (Fathom). Dickerson declares, “I want to tell these stories, but I also want to include the voice of the women who are working and fighting against these kinds of oppression, because you never hear about them either” (Fathom). The stories Dickerson merges together to form the script serve as ripe material for the play. *Identities on Trial* revives the reals of women by staging personal narratives, testimonies, and other documented stories from a host of varying places around the world such as Nepal, Serbia, Bangladesh, Guatemala, Palestine, Republic of Congo, Taiwan, North Korea, and the United States of America. Collectively, the stories dramatize a global history—a history that ranges across time and geographic borders—of impairment because of wars, sexually inflicted traumas, and acts of cultural genocide.

Freda Scott Giles asserts, “Through showing the experiences of Bangladeshi, Roma, Guatemalan, Iranian, Nepalese, and other women [. . .] Dickerson reasserts her belief in the universality of oppressed women’s experiences. . .” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 144). The term “universal” is a controversial term that has a long history of debate regarding women’s rights issues within a global context. Specifically, the critique has been that the term “universal” is often employed as a catchall phrase that essentializes the concerns of women – from diverse backgrounds – into one category which further

harkens us back to a white feminist agenda whereby the particularities of race and class, among other identity markers, have historically been negated. I, by no means, am suggesting that Giles is using the term “universal” in this manner for there has been a recent flux of literature that invites scholars and activist to rethink the impetus behind the usage of the controversial idiom. For instance, in her article “Debating Women's Human Rights as a Universal Feminist Project: Defending Women's Human Rights as a Political Tool,” political scientist Jill Stean rehearses the classic debate of the universal vs. the particular. Stean writes,

A debate duly unfolded within academic feminism about whether it was possible to reconcile respect for the diverse identities of actual women with the imperative, which had historically been central to feminism, to establish some unifying 'interests'. Wounded by the charge that Western feminists were (unwittingly perhaps) reproducing North-South power relations while ostensibly acting 'on behalf of women 'oppressed' by 'backward' traditions and cultural practices, those within the academy who clung on to a project of liberation or emancipation acknowledged the dangers of co-option into projects that advanced Western hegemony in the name of promoting the advancement of women. Similarly, it was recognised that a pernicious practice of 'Othering' might be manifest in the articulation of universal claims. Nevertheless, while recognising the importance of the social meanings attached to 'woman' in certain localised and cultural contexts, in some quarters concerns were raised that an 'ethos of pluralism' might wholly undermine the legitimacy of a feminist politics that 'addressed the concerns of women around the world. In so far as 'economic, social, political, legal and cultural structures that perpetuate gender inequality' remained 'in place throughout the world' gender subordination was a 'concrete universal' that was 'transnational in scope. (15)

Stean points out that “while this debate has been (mis?)represented as one that is characterised by polarised or incommensurable positions, contemporary feminist theorists are increasingly exploring, if not wholly embracing, the possibilities for dialogue or conversation in the interests of negotiating an inter-subjective 'universalism' that might, in turn, form the basis for a transnational feminist practice.” In that light, Stean contends

that while arguing for the need to pay attention to the “cultural, national, and ethnic” differences among women, we should also remain careful to not “foreclose possibilities for forging some common ground, nor engaging in discussions on apposite strategies for gaining equality” (11). It is in this vein, I contend, that Giles’ application of the term “universal” is apropos to assessing Dickerson’s trilogy. Accordingly, I argue that while reviving the life of these global women through the embodiment of their narratives, Dickerson’s dramaturgy travels between the national and the international, thus creating sites of transformation and transference through what I consider a transnational feminist praxis through performance. Precisely by privileging women’s voices worldwide, Dickerson’s trilogy forges dialogues across varying geographies and penetrates cultural and political boundaries.

To help elucidate transnational feminism – as both a theory and a praxis, I turn to Black feminist studies pioneer Gloria I. Joseph. In her essay, “The Role of the Black Women in the Black Liberation Movement and the Women's Movement and on to Transnational Feminism,” Joseph purports, “To say that feminism is transnational is not to say that feminist analyses and forms of political organizing cross borders in a transhistorical or ahistorical way, but it is to say that there are particularities of the ways in which masculinity and femininity [sic] are understood and constructed and particularities of the ways in which sexual politics operate as a whole” (85). In other words, transnational feminism challenges the notion of a monolithic or homogenous feminism that encapsulates women around the world without taking into consideration historical and material differences. Joseph maintains that in order to initiate and sustain a

transnational feminist praxis one must be conscious of “shifting the unit of analysis from local to regional and from national culture to relations across cultures” (85).

Similarly, Postcolonial feminist scholar and activist Chandra Talpade Mohanty has probed for a feminist praxis that warrants “strategic coalitions across class, race, and national boundaries” (*Feminism without Borders* 18). In her collection of essays, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003), particularly her canonical essay “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” Mohanty critiques Western feminists’ representations of Third World feminist concerns wherein the result is often a binary because “the distinctions are made on the basis of the privileging of a particular group as the norm or referent” (22). Furthermore, Mohanty challenges “women as a category of analysis” because it “refers to the crucial assumption that all women, across classes and cultures, are somehow socially constituted as a homogenous group identified prior to the process of analysis” (22). In view of that, Mohanty writes that the “homogeneity of women as a group is produced not on the basis of biological essentials but rather on the basis of secondary sociological and anthropological universals. Thus, the discursively consensual homogeneity of women as a group is mistaken for the historically specific material reality of groups of women (22-23). Clarifying her argument, Mohanty writes

What is problematic about this kind of use of “women” as a group, as a stable category of analysis, is that it assumes an ahistorical, universal unity between women based on a generalized notion of their subordination. Instead of analytically demonstrating the production of women as socioeconomic political groups within particular local contexts, this analytical move limits the definition of the female subject to gender identity, completely bypassing social class and ethnic identities. (31).

As Mohanty would have it, "shared oppression" is not what connects women around the world. Rather, what "binds women together is a sociological notion of the "sameness" of their oppression" that in turn creates a transnational feminist collective (22-23).

For this study, transnational feminism is defined as the advocacy of women's rights that crosses geographic borders while remaining cognizant of diverse histories and material differences with regards to racial, sexual, class, and other socio-cultural struggles. As such, transnational feminism provides "a way of thinking about women in similar contexts across the world, in different geographical spaces, rather than as all women across the world" (Alexander and Mohanty 24). On that note, I ponder: how does Dickerson recognize the commonalities within these global women's experiences without oversimplification and generalization? As Joseph states, "There is a drastic need for an exchange of experiences, ideas and strategies from all strata of women within each country" ("The Role of the Black Women" 85). To these points, I contend that Dickerson does not speak for global women by creating a fictive script. Rather, Dickerson's transnational feminist praxis is curated through the performer's embodiment of the real words of the global women represented in the performance. Additionally, the "exchange of experiences, ideas, and strategies" that Joseph calls for happens when the "performers, through the process of preparation and execution of the performance, are transformed into performance scholars, enabling the audience to synthesize and theorize relationships across history, across cultures, across academic and performance disciplines" ("Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu" 142). Both the performers and the audience, then, are implicated within a performance that interrogates global subjectivities with the further goal of forming transnational solidarities.

### ***An Analysis of Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer***

The five prayerful performers include four Black women (Ayana Cahrr, Walonda Lewis, Michele McCullough, and Lisa Richards) and a Filipino woman (Maureen Sebastian). Before the performance officially begins, Glenda Dickerson takes center stage and greets the audience. She quotes Sojourner Truth, whom she dubs “that wise race woman”: “Now if the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn the world upside down, these women together ought to be able to turn it back and get it right side up again.” This quote is taken from Sojourner Truth’s famous speech, “Ain’t I a Woman,” in which she delivered at the Women's Convention in Akron, Ohio, on May 29, 1851 (*Broken Utterances* 93-103). Whereas the speech itself is an early declaration of Black feminist thought, the line that Dickerson quotes suggests that it is indeed women who will save themselves from oppression. Moreover, the speech suggests that resistance to oppression happens in the collective action of women rather than individual agency. This notion is further substantiated when Dickerson invites prayerful performer Walonda to the stage to perform with her Sterling Brown’s poem, *Old Lem*. Dickerson expresses directly to the audience: “It contains within itself all the seeds of racism, oppression and genocide.” The poem tells the story of a Black man, Old Lem, who details his experience with racism and destruction at the hands of white men in the Cotton South. The following refrain in the poem suggests that violence acts enacted upon Black bodies does not happen by singular white men, but rather these acts are committed in groups, such as lynch mobs.

They Don’t come by ones  
They don’t come by twos  
But they come by tens.

In my analysis of *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* in chapter 3 I discuss how Dickerson reimagines Langston Hughes' blues poem, *Bound No 'th Blues*. Similarly, Dickerson inverts the refrain of *Old Lem* to mirror Sojourner Truth's declaration about the strength in numbers. In sync, Dickerson and Walonda declare:

I don't come by ones  
I don't come by twos  
But I come by tens.

Further substantiating the strength in numbers, the prayerful performers enter the stage and repeat the refrain:

I don't come ones  
I don't come by twos  
But I come by tens.

Dickerson concludes the chant: "But I come for peace." Dickerson does not perform in the remainder of the play. She takes a seat in the audience as the five prayerful performers drum on pots with wooden ladle spoons. As discussed at length in the previous chapter, the pots and the wooden ladle spoons – artifacts typically associated with the kitchen – symbolize the kitchen as a gendered space of resistance. Individually, the prayerful performers introduce themselves by first stating their name, secondly denoting their patriotism, and concluding by expressing their deed of choice in the name of "peace." For instance, Michelle states, "My name is Michelle McCullough. I am a patriot and I excavate for peace." The only modification in each speech is the deed performed in the name of peace. For example, Lisa states that she "come for peace" while Ayana declares that she "drums for peace." It is Walonda's action, however, that sets the play in motion: "My name is Walonda Lewis. I am a patriot and I transform for peace."

Walonda's intent to "transform" is quite significant as it speaks back to the project at large. Whereas Walonda's speech is a riff on the project's title, "The Project of Transforming thru Performing," it's purpose is twofold. First, Walonda is signifying the act of transforming contemporaneous sources into a performance dialogue. Secondly, Walonda signifies the prayerful performer's act of transforming into the women whose narratives they perform by embodying their words.

After the performers introduce themselves, they walk behind a row of two tables each adorned with non-Western designed fabric. A bell rings as if to signify a beat or shift in the performance segment. The performers recite select lines of "Moving Towards Home," a poem by celebrated Caribbean-American poet June Jordan. The poem was included in the *Women on War* anthology. As the prayerful performers narrate the poem, each performer independently recites a line while action verbs that describe crimes, such as "shot" and "raped," are repeated in unison. The focus of the poem is on a woman who "do not wish to speak about" [ . . . ] "unspeakable events" such as "the bulldozer and the red dirt not quite covering all the arms and legs," or "the woman who shoved her baby into a stranger's hands before she was led away," or "the father whose sons were shot through the head while they slit his own throat before the eyes of his wife." The prayerful performers recitation of the poem is indicative of a Greek chorus which is a device, according to J. G. Warry, author of *Greek Aesthetic Theory*, "for conveying thoughts which in narrative would be recorded as unspoken" (129). The inclusion of this poem, moreover, is an interesting choice. "Written in response to the massacre of Palestinians in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Lebanon" according to literary scholar Jane Creighton, "the poem builds a litany of horrors based on extensive reporting from the

camps” (“Writing War, Writing Memory” 250). It is easy to see how Dickerson was inspired Jordan’s poem and therefore used the poem as architecture the conceiving of *Identities on Trial*. For *Identities on Trial* is likewise constructed as a “litany of horrors” based on accounts taken during the WCAR conference.

Breaking from Jordan’s poem and ending on the line “I do not wish to speak about unspeakable events,” the prayerful performers recite a small segment from Nadezhda Mandelstam’s memoir, *Hope Against Hope*:

But, if nothing else is left,  
We must scream.  
Silence is the real crime against humanity.

Mandelstam’s statement is redolent of feminist scholars and activists who call for women to be “unsilenced” and speak their histories, experiences, and truths. Mandelstam’s words, more specifically, are significantly reminiscent of Audre Lorde’s essay, in which I reference in chapter one, where Lorde demands that for women who find themselves within oppressed situations it is their voice that offers solace, “even at the risk” of having their words “bruised or misunderstood” (“Transforming Silence into Language and Action” 40). The bell is rung once again. The performers take a seat with the exception of Lisa.

The next segment of the performance is entitled “I was Born a Black Woman: The Introductions.” The purpose of this segment is to introduce the audience to some of the women who spoke and delivered testimonies at the WCAR conference.

Lisa speaks: “I was born a Black woman. But now, I am become a Nepalese.” This line from Lisa’s speech is adapted from the final stanza of June Jordan’s poem: “I was born a Black woman and now become a Palestinian.” Returning to Creighton’s analysis of

Jordan's political poetry, she maintains that the last stanza of the poem raises the "notion that one can presume to know, and therefore stand in witness of, the truth about suffering across complex boundaries marking a cultural other" (250). Precisely, this is what Dickerson was aiming to accomplish by having women of color whose very experiences with racial, gendered, and class discrimination could be paralleled with the women whose narratives they conjure. As Dickerson declares, "We enter the black woman's voice as a metaphor for all women and for all oppressed people" (Fathom). Each of the prayerful performers stand and announce: "I was born a Black woman. But now, I am become..." As they "become," which I contend is the act of transforming thru performance, each performer takes on the role of a woman from another country. For instance, as Lisa continues her speech she states:

My name is Indira Ghale. I am a 32-year old Dalit woman from the eastern part of Nepal. I am working for the Feminist Dalit Organization, the only Dalit women's organization in Nepal. As objectives, FEDO has plans and programs to deal with problems such as untouchability, trafficking, rape, and sexual exploitation. It is one of the rarest occasions for a person like me to be present in a great place like this, where people with tender hearts and lobbying attitudes towards the world have gathered.

Indira Ghale's story animates the notion of intersectionality especially where gender and class are concerned. In Nepal, which is dominated by Hindu religion, there are a total of five caste groups based on political and social life: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (soldiers and administrators or officials), Vaishyas (artist and businessmen), Shudras (servants and farmers), and Dalits (oppressed and exploited). It is often noted that the Dalits originally come from Shudras group, but because of their marginalized status, they've become a group distinguished from all others. "The word 'dalit' or "crushed underfoot" or "broken into pieces" is the contemporary version of the word

‘Untouchable’” (Ghose 85). While colorism plays a small portion in how one is situated within the caste system in Nepal, the system is constructed primarily through several combined elements such as birth right, ethnicity, occupation, and financial stability. As the lowest on the social totem pole the Dalit population experience discrimination as a daily practice. For instance, they are unable to attend Temple or drink from public water foundations. The Dalit group also experience discrimination when it comes to education and employment. It is the Dalit women—whom Indira Ghale is representing in her testimony—that experience discrimination in its harshest form because “they are women, they are poor and because they are of the lowest caste” (Raj et al. 16). If one of the premises of transnational feminism is about acknowledging how women around the world have similar experiences, then one sees how Indira Ghale’s testimony mirrors the history of Black women—from enslavement to modern times— within the United States (and the diaspora for that matter) who’ve been treated in a similar fashion because of their overlapping markers of identity namely race, class, and gender.

In the remainder of the segment, the prayerful performers “become/transform” into other women who, like Indira Ghale, are actively working to transform the devastating conditions that the women suffer. Maureen “become/transform” into Behshid Najafi, an Iranian and German woman who fled Iran in 1986 because “there was very strong pressure against people with differing opinions and ideologies.” The audience further learns that Behshid Najafi, along with a group of Iranian women, “founded the Iranian women association in Cologne.” Through Walonda the audience hears the story of Nahar Alam, a Bangladeshi woman who serves as a gender asylum seeker with the founding of Andolan, a South Asian workers organization that advocates on behalf of

“exploited low-waged South Asian workers, including Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, Nepalese and Sri Lankan.” Michelle stands in the place of Vera Kurtic, a Roma woman from South East Europe who expresses that where she’s from “living has never been easy.” She denotes her excitement in having the chance to “speak for all those women that will never get this opportunity: to go across half of the planet in order to get their voice heard.” She declares, “And they have too much to tell!” Lastly, Ayana “become/transform” into Maria who hails from the western part of Guatemala. As Maria, Ayana states:

I am forty-nine years old and during my life I have lived many painful experiences. Today I am going to share with you not only some of my painful experience, but also the values of the Mayan people. These values and principals helped our grandfathers and our grandmothers. They have helped me, and they will continue to help the Mayan people.

The “painful experiences that Maria is speaking of is the Guatemalan Civil War (1960-1996). One of the major occurrences during the war was the genocide and ethnocide of Mayans, whom at that time were the largest population of indigenous people in Guatemala. In her longer testimony which is not included in the script, Maria describes the effects of the war:

The war left more than 40,000 widows, thousands and thousands of disappeared people, over one million internally displaced people, over 300,000 refugees, and over 150,000 dead. They burnt our forest, destroyed thousands and thousands of homes. They burned our corn, and for us corn is sacred. They were psychologically, physically, and spiritually affected. In those years, we never knew when or where we were going to be attacked, nor where the bombs would come from. (Raj et al. 71)

Later in her testimony, Maria tells the story of two Mayan women who were victims of sexual assault as a result of the war. It is important to highlight, moreover, that Maria’s story is not only of condemnation and critique. As she notes in the portion of the

testimony that was performed in *Identities on Trial*, one of her purposes in delivering her story during the WCAR is to also acknowledge and celebrate her Mayan culture. This moment in Maria's testimony brings me to a critique of Dickerson's dramaturgy. I contend that *Identities on Trial* would have made a stronger case around the notion of transnational solidarity had Dickerson included the final portion of Maria's testimony:

Even after all that has happened, I still have hope. And when people as me how it is possible to have hope, I answer that I don't feel alone. There are women who have helped me very much through their example. They are the Mayan women of Guatemala and the women of civil society. But they are also you. They are South African women who have given us an example of struggle and hope. They are the Palestinian women, the women of Nicaragua and of Vietnam. And they are indigenous women, like Samis, the Kunas, the Miskitas, and all the women of Asia, of the Americas, of Europe and of Africa that inspire me and fill me with hope to be able to struggle to achieve a truly dignified and human future with real diversity and with all of our rights assured for ourselves, for our daughters and sons, and for our granddaughter and grandsons. **WOMEN UNITED WILL NEVER BE DEFEATED!** (*Women at the Intersection* 72).

The conclusion of Maria's statement simultaneously speaks to the purpose of the WCAR as well as the undergirding premise of *Identities on Trial*. That is, although women have been and continue to be oppressed, silenced, and invalidated through various systems, regimes, and cultural traditions, there is a trajectory of women's activism worldwide that have counterattacked systemic oppression while also employing strategies for healing.

After Ayana's speech as Maria, each of the performers state "I was born a black woman." In unison they speak: "but now am become," and then go into an overlapping rollcall where they identify all the women represented at the WCAR: "Dalit, Iranian, Bangladeshi, Romani, Guatemalan, Marshallese, Filipino, Korean, Mayan, Hopi Pacific Islander, Micronesian, Afghan, Indonesian, Japanese, Vietnamese, Egyptian, Dalit, Taiwanese, Sudanese, Palestinian, Chinese, Cuban, Nicaraguan." By the time the rollcall

has come to an end, each of the prayerful performers have wrapped themselves in a large swaddle of fabric to offer visualization of the women from these various territories.

The bell rings again. In unison, the prayerful performers recite a small portion of the “Women’s Peace Platform for the Summit,” a declaration made by members of U.S. delegation of Women for a Meaningful Summit in Athens, Greece in 1988. The summit, wherein Coretta Scott King served as head of the US delegation, was held as an introduction to the summit between President Ronald Reagan and Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev. The members who wrote the declaration include: Coretta Scott King, Betty Lall, Maxine Waters, Cora Weiss, Via Artmane, Elena Kamenskaya, Margarita Maximova, and Galina Ustinova. The portion of the decree that the performers recited is as follows:

We, Women for a Meaningful Summit, Declare that  
War is obsolete; and that  
We are not enemies – our real enemies are hunger,  
Disease, racism, poverty, inequality, injustice and violence.

The women who authored the declaration are either from the United States (King, Lall, Waters, and Weiss) or from the Soviet Union (Artmane, Kamenskaya, Maximova, and Ustinova). As such, their decree which is a unified stance against acts of war could be viewed as a transnational feminist coalition, thus offering another example of a transnational feminist praxis through performance being animated within *Identities on Trial*.

The segment “I was Born a Black Woman: The Introductions” finishes with the prayerful performers singing verse one of “Let’s Get Ourselves Together,” a protest song written by Andre Myers, the musical consultant for the production. Like Dickerson’s use of select poetry within the performance discussed earlier, the performance of the song is

modeled in the style of a Greek chorus where the lyrics express the innermost thoughts and wishes of the collective. The lyrical content of the song, for instance, expresses the collective's aim to "get ourselves together" and prepare to "protest in the streets tonight" a catalogue of injustices. If *Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* is a performance that is in response to September 11, 2001, then the song evidences that *Identities on Trial* is a protest play<sup>34</sup> that is in direct response to the War on Terror. This is indicated by several sections within the first verse:

Let's get ourselves together  
Protest in the streets at tonight  
For we've gotta tell this President  
That war ain't right.

Let's get ourselves together  
So the senseless hate will cease  
So the killing will stop within Iraq  
By means of peace.

Dickerson's use of the Greek chorus tradition is noteworthy. According to Aristotle and his *Poetics*, the chorus "should be regarded as one of the actors; it should be an integral part of the whole and share in action" (60). Several scholars, including Brian Richardson, Albert Weiner, and Peter Burian,<sup>35</sup> have taken Aristotle's words to mean that the chorus, then, should be thought of as a collective of actors performing the role of one character. For instance, Burian writes, "The chorus constitutes not only a collective character standing in a defined relation to the other characters of the drama, but also as an intermediary between the world of the play and the audience, whose perspective it helps to shape" ("198). Taking this into account, the primary function of the chorus in

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<sup>34</sup> For more on protest plays, see Monroe Lippman's "An Analysis of the Protest Play."

<sup>35</sup> See Brian Richardson's "Point of View in Drama: Diegetic Monologue, Unreliable Narrators, and the Author's Voice on Stage," and Albert Weiner's "The Function of the Tragic Greek Chorus."

Dickerson's trilogy is to reinstate for the audience the central idea or theme of the play.<sup>36</sup> Take, for instance, the poetry of Sterling Brown and June Jordan, Nadezhda Mandelstam's memoir, the Women's Peace Platform for the Summit, and the song "Let's Get Ourselves Together;" together the variety of sources, performed by a "collective character," constitutes a "collective" pledge to oppose racism, sexism, classism, and other forms of oppression that often results in brutal and/or life-threatening circumstances.

Entitled "Storytelling," the next segment of the performance focuses on women who share explicit details of their experiences as survivors of sexual trauma, institutional and/or state sanctioned violence. For instance, many of the stories in this segment shed light on the ways in which military regimes around the world participate in the institutionalization of sexual violence – a phenomenon that is exacerbated during wartime. As political scientist Zillah Eisenstein puts it, "Rape articulates the violence encoded in gender; in wartime it reinscribes the continuity of gender inscription of woman as victim rather than actor" ("Resexing Militarism for the Globe" 37). The traumas enacted upon women's bodies are, furthermore, gendered acts of war whereby the tools of assault can be rape, genital mutilation, and sex trafficking. Returning to Eisenstein's analysis of the relationship between war and sexual violence, she writes, "Rape is war in brutal, torturous form. . . Women's bodies are appropriated, conquered and destroyed" (37). This notion is made evident in the following story.

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<sup>36</sup> For examples of the Greek chorus aesthetic used in other contemporary Black feminist dramas, see Jennifer L. Haye' essay, "Guess Who's Coming to Dinner: Choral Performance in *Mud, River, Stone* by Lynn Nottage. In this essay, Haye argues that Nottage's use of the choral is, too, reminiscent of the Greek chorus arguing that "Nottage encourages audiences to consider the various political and social issues her chorus introduces" (40). It is in this same vein that I contend Dickerson employs the Greek chorus aesthetic. In a similar sense, Sharon Friedman in her article, "Gendered Terrain in Contemporary Theatre of War by Women," describes how Nottage and playwright Danai Gurira "use the device of a group (collective) protagonist, popular in earlier forms of feminist theatre, to signify a shared condition within a specific historical context. . ." (120).

The stories to initiate this segment are taken from the Women’s International War Crimes Tribunal 2000 for the Trial of Japanese Military Sexual Slavery. Discussed at length above, the tribunal was established to prosecute and seek retribution from those responsible for imposing atrocities—such as rape, sexual slavery, deportation, extermination, and murder—on women in the Asia Pacific region during World War II. Ayana reads directly from the “summary of findings”:

In the early 1990s, Asian women began to break almost five decades of painful silence. They demanded an apology and compensation for the atrocities they suffered under Japanese military sexual slavery the War. The courageous survivors were euphemistically called “comfort women.”

“Comfort women” is the term used to denote women who were rendered to offer sexual services to Japanese soldiers during the war in comfort stations or what is also referred to as military brothels. “[A]n English translation of the Japanese euphemism *ianfu*,” according to sociocultural anthropologist C. Sarah Soh, comfort women “refers to the tens of thousands of young women and girls of various ethnic and national backgrounds who were pressed into sexual servitude with the invasion of Manchuria in 1931 and ended with Japan’s defeat in 1945” (*The Comfort Women* xii). The summary of findings—which was used to conceive this segment of the script—does not include the full testimonies of surviving comfort women. Instead, the summary of findings extracts various lines from larger testimonies that illustrates the severity of being a comfort woman.

These extractions are what Dickerson included in *Identities on Trial*. Maureen and Michelle perform this segment by reciting the extracted dialogue and then announcing the name of the woman who made the statement and the country where she was a comfort woman:

Maureen: I don't want to die as the ghost of a virgin.  
 Michelle: Mun Pil-gi, Korea  
 Maureen: It was so shameful so we dug up a hole and covered it.  
 Michelle: Maxima Regala Dela Cruz, Philippines  
 Maureen: I was regarded as a dirty woman.  
 Michelle: Teng-Kao Pao-Chu, Taiwan  
 Maureen: My husband said, 'it is better to have a left-over dog than a left over woman.'  
 Michelle: Belen Alonso Sagun, Philippines  
 Maureen: I obeyed in order to live.  
 Michelle: Mang-Mei Cu, Taiwan  
 Maureen: They treated us like animals.  
 Michelle: Ms Suhanah, Indonesia  
 Maureen: What we are saying is the truth. We didn't come here to lie.  
 Michelle: Esmeralda Boe, East Timor  
 Maureen: We want Japan to ask for forgiveness.  
 Michelle: Yuan Zhulin, China

The comfort women's public outcry of the injustices endured at the hands of Japanese Military is quite notable and achieves several ends. First, it breaks a long history of silence about institutionalized forms of sexual exploitation. Secondly, their efforts animate the notion of a collective solidarity among women from varying territories who have reclaimed their agency by speaking their truths aloud.

*Identities on Trial* slightly shifts away from narratives of sexual trauma with the next few parts of the performance. However, the connective thread that remains throughout this segment is the critique military of regimes, specifically condemning how they employ destructive and deadly tactics during combat, such as bomb droppings, on people living in war-ravaged communities. Similar to crossing territorial borders, these writings also cross time periods. For instance, Michelle performs, *Epitaph 1945*, a poem by Jewish-American writer Naomi Replanksy that critique's America's bombing of Hiroshima in 1945:

My spoon was lifted when the bomb came down

That left no face, no hand, no spoon to hold.  
Two hundred thousand died in my hometown.  
This came to pass before my soup was cold.

Immediately following, Walonda performs the narrative of Darlene Keju-Johnson of The Marshall Islands. With this story, Keju-Johnson describes how in 1954 the United States dropped a hydrogen bomb named BRAVO on Bikini, Marshall Islands.

Now we have this problem of what we call “jellyfish babies.” These babies are born like jellyfish. They have no eyes. They have no heads. They have no arms. They have no legs. They do not shape like human beings at all. But they are being born on the labour table. The most colourful, ugly things you have ever seen.

The final commentary on bomb droppings is a poem by Minerva Salado, a celebrated Cuban poet and journalist. The title of the poem is “Report from Vietnam for International Women’s Day.” Performed by prayerful performer Michelle, Salado tells the story of twenty-one-year-old Anh Dai, a woman who was “ignited by flames, but she does not burn with passion. It is napalm.” An anti-Vietnam War testament, Salado’s poem uses verbal imagery to conjure the visual aftermath of America dropping napalm bombs over Vietnam with the result of melting flesh and death by asphyxiation. It has been argued that the “poem evokes an iconic photograph from the Vietnam War era of a naked Vietnamese child screaming while she is running down a road after a napalm attack on her village” (Mann and Patterson 429). These performed sources are undergirded by a transnational feminist anti-war sentiment in the fact that the writers demonstrate a commitment to communities affected by war around the world. If one of the major tenets of transnational feminism is about establishing coalitions across borderlines by forming an alliance through activist centered praxis, then I concede that Replansky’s and Salado’s poems do such a thing. For instance, neither Replansky or

Salado are from the terrains in which they write about. However, through their poetry the writers travel across international borders with the aim of exposing how militaries enact sanctioned violence on others by depicting the destructive and often deadly outcomes.

Whereas the previous section offers a critique of institutional violence through war and the military, the ensuing narrative also addresses how violence is taken up in other institutions. With the following story, the institutions being critiqued are prisons. Walonda narrates the testimony of Tanya McClary, a civil rights and criminal defense lawyer and activist who shares stories of how women are mistreated within the American prison system. McClary states, “In US prisons, sexual abuse against women inmates is so widespread that the violation has become an involuntary part of their sentence.” McClary goes on to tell the story of Robin Lucas, a black woman whose “nightmare began on February 24, 1994” after being sentenced to a 33-month prison sentence for conspiracy to commit bank fraud. As Walonda reads Tanya’s testimony, Lisa walks centerstage and lies face down on the floor. It is soon made apparent that Lisa is performing the action articulated in McClary’s story. As McClary, Walonda reads:

One night while laying on her small cot in the isolation unit in the predawn, three men inmates entered her cell, apparently given access to the isolation unit by guards. She was beaten, raped and cursed repeatedly. For days after the assault, Robin’s body was weak and wracked with pain. She bled continuously from her rectum. Repeated requests for medical services were denied.

When McClary concludes her testimony, Lisa sits up in the middle of the stage embodying the actions of Robin Lucas. She looks out to the audience and speaks: “When I went into prison, I was supposed to give up my liberty – but not my soul.” Indeed, what connects Robin’s story with Darlene Keju-Johnson’s story as well as with the poems of Minerva Salado and Naomi Replanksy is state sanctioned violence in the form of torture

that renders women both vulnerable and invisible. Furthermore, these stories together evidence what Angela Davis describes as “a relationship between militarization and the prisonization of our local and global landscapes” (“A Vocabulary for Feminist Praxis” 25). As such, these stories fluctuate between the national and the international, further evidencing that institutionalized acts of violence are a transnational phenomenon.

State sanctioned violence is also taken up in the succeeding testimonies delivered by Nijima Ahmed Jadullah and her 15-year old granddaughter, Manar Faraj, two Palestinian women who were displaced from their land because of the Palestinian War of 1948. In this case, state sanctioned violence happens in the form of displacement from and demolition and expropriation of Palestinian land. Nijima, played by Michelle, shares with the audience that in 1948, at the age of 14 and pregnant with her first child, she was living in the village of Ras Abu Ammar “where my parents and grandparents before them were born.” “Just 14 miles of Jerusalem,” Nijima extols that her village was “beautiful,” for it was “surrounded on three sides by a deep river valley, where wild flowers bloomed in winter. We grew olives, grapes and almonds, wheat and barley.” “This was the world that I dreamed I would raise my children in,” Nijima proclaims, “the world that I myself would grow old in.” Nijima’s story takes a turn, however, when “On October 21, 1948 this world was destroyed.” On that dreadful day, Nijima, along with “three-quarters of a million Palestinians were pushed from their homes” as a result of the Zionist Operation Ha-Har. Detailing what is now known as “ethnic cleansing,” Nijima goes on to explain how the “cleansing” was particularly detrimental for the women who were pregnant at the time. Some of the women gave birth on the side of the road while some lost their babies in transit to the caves in the mountains. Nijima bemoans, “I gave birth in a cave.”

The story takes on another level when Nijima's granddaughter, Manar, played by Maureen, joins-in and gives her testimony. Stating that she has "lived all my life in Deheisheh Refugee Camp," Manar illustrates how the trauma caused by the displacement is intergenerational. Several scholars have written on intergenerational trauma among Palestinian refugees such as women's studies scholar Isis Nusair and scholar of trauma studies Michal Shamai. The scholarship of both Nusair and Shamai consider how first, second, and third generations of Palestinian refugees respond(ed) differently to being displaced from their land. Whereas the first generation sought out strategies for safety and survival, "the second generation began to create rituals to memorialize the loss of the family home and the third generation turned the pain, which most of them had not directly experienced, into political activities" (*Systemic Interventions for Collective National Trauma* 85). Precisely, as Manar is triply removed from the actual event of displacement that occurred in 1948, she represents "many third-generation women intertwined and zigzagged between the personal and the political and what it means to be a young woman and Palestinian in Israel" (Nusair 86). Isis Nusair writes of third generation displaced Palestinian women:

On the one hand, unlike women from the first and second generations, they felt that they knew the Hebrew language and were therefore better equipped to interact with Israeli state institutions. Yet, they too defined their relation to the state as that of alienation and subordination. [...] As many third-generation women were making sense of their lives, they seemed to have developed gender awareness in describing and explaining the forces that shaped their experiences. [...] Third-generation women defined themselves in personal terms while still describing their belonging to their communities and the larger Palestinian society. ("Gendering the Narratives" 85-90).

Manar's narrative exemplifies the beliefs Nusair describes above: "When Israel took my home away from my grandmother, they took everything from her, from my mother and

from me.” Manar’s narrative further illustrates how third generation Palestinian women are actively seeking out justice to rectify intergenerational histories of abuse, neglect, state sanctioned trauma. “But the occupation can never take away my love for Palestine and my struggle to defend our freedom.”

The following narrative returns us back to the topic of sexual trauma enacted through institutional or state sanctioned violence. At the center of the story is Ita Nadia, a human rights worker and activist in Indonesia, who shares one of her many experiences in helping rape survivors during the 1998 riots in Indonesia. The rapes, among other forms of violence, were committed because of the “student-led demands for political reform [which] brought down President Suharto’s three-decade rule” (Raj et al. 74).

According to the introduction prior to Ita Nadia’s narrative in *Women at the Intersection*, President Suharto ruled from 1966-1998 under an “oppressive and authoritarian system” (74). The editors of *Women at the Intersection* write:

Much of the violence that occurred during the riots was targeted at the ethnic Chinese populations. Their homes and businesses were destroyed, and Chinese women were subjected to organized and systemic rapes and other forms of sexual violence. Many human rights workers treating the victims believe that the military had a role in the atrocities, and that the rapes were used as a political tool. Over 170 cases of rape committed against ethnic Chinese women were documented in Indonesia during one week in May 1998, with the speculation that the numbers were actually significantly higher. (74)

Ita Nadia, played by Lisa, is one of those human rights workers. As Ita walks downstage from the tables where the cast is seated, Maureen and Walonda meet her in the middle of the stage, lie down and cover themselves with a large piece of fabric. Ita speaks: “I got a call from somebody, asking me to immediately come to a house in West Jakarta. When I arrived, I was taken into a room, where I saw two

young girls, 21-year-old and 18-year-old, lying down, their eyes closed, face pale, crying softly.” Ita bends down and joins the girls. “I saw fresh blood on the cloth that covered them.” Maureen, embodying one of the girls, bemoans, “Mom, this hurts.” Portraying the other girl, Walonda sits up, wraps her arms around her chest to signify that her nipples had been cut-off from her breast. She screams out, “they cut them off, Mom, they cut them off.” Ita concludes: “They didn’t let my hand go the whole day.”

*Identities on Trial* travels through time and location once again. This time Dickerson recuperates the history of Black enslavement by reviving a Black woman’s narrative from *Autobiography of a Female Slave*. Written by white slave owner-turned-abolitionist, Martha Griffith Browne and published in 1857, the book is a collected account of slave narratives formulated into a single narrative that testifies to the cruelties of American enslavement. The extracted quote that Dickerson pulls from the segment “A Cruel Whipping” was published in the anthology *War on Women*, one of the three sources Dickerson collates into the script for *Identities on Trial*.

Before moving on with my analysis of the performed text from the slave narrative, I want to take a moment to offer context on Martha Griffith Browne’s identity as well as her purpose for constructing the slave narrative. Scholar of anti-slavery literature Joe Lockhard offers context:

This narrative relates the life experiences of a light-colored slave woman named Ann, but soon after its appearance a young, white woman name Mattie Griffith stepped forward to acknowledge authorship. Not only was she white, she was a Kentucky slave owner. An immediate ethical reaction is to recoil at the appropriation of a slave’s voice, and particularly at its expropriation by a member of the slaveowning [sic] classes. But once unravelled [sic], the story reveals a woman of substantial integrity and political passion. Briefly, Mattie Griffith inherited a half-dozen black

slaves but abhorred the institution of slavery. Quite poor and living in Philadelphia, she wrote what is essentially a 410-page sentimental novel in an attempt to raise money to resettle these slaves in freedom north of the Ohio River. Although the novel failed financially, she accomplished her goal with a grant from the American Anti-Slavery Society, and began a career as a writer, abolitionist, and suffragist during which she worked with William Lloyd Garrison, Frederick Douglas, Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and many others. In her act of narrative race imposture as an effort forwards reparation and personal expiation, Mattie Griffith remains unique in the history of American slaveholding. (“Passing Away, or Narrative Transvestism as Social Metaphor in Multiethnic Societies” 202)

As described, Browne’s writing of the slave narrative was undeniably an honorable deed especially if, as Joe Lockhard notes, Browne rebelled against her own family’s proslavery sentiments by freeing her inherited slaves and publishing the slave narrative in which her family “objected deeply” before leaving Kentucky and relocating to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania (“A Light Broke Out Over My Mind” 245-246). However, there is still the question of why Dickerson selected Browne’s fictional slave narrative to be personified within the play when there readily exists a body of slave narratives written by former Black slaves. How does this fictional account complicate the history of American enslavement as it is presented through the lens of a white women?

The extracted quote, performed by prayerful performer Ayana, reads as follows: “I knew the resistance was vain; so I submitted to have my clothed torn from my body; for modesty, so much commended in a white woman, is in a negro pronounced affectation.” By including this extracted quote in *Identities on Trial*, I contend, Dickerson achieves two things. First, she places a focus on America’s history of enslavement which—both metaphorically and literally—was a war on Black bodies. Through beatings, mutilation, rape, imprisonment, and other forms of torture – that is, specific acts to inflict physical, mental, and spiritual pain – Black bodies were devalued through state

sanctioned violence. For Black enslaved women, the war enacted upon their bodies happened twice over with regards to rape and sexual objectification. Not only did some slave masters sexually abuse enslaved women, but some of the wives of slave masters would beat them (or have them beat), among other forms of punishment, as a kind of retribution for sleeping with their husbands. This was done primarily because the enslaved woman served as a constant reminder of the slave master's infidelities.

Secondly, and quite significantly, Dickerson brings attention to the dynamics between Black womanhood and white womanhood. During the period of American Slavery, Black women were, to quote Angela Y. Davis, "released from the chains of the myth of femininity" ("Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves" 87). Davis continues, "In order to function as slave, the black woman had to be annulled as woman, that is, as woman in her historical stance of wardship under the entire male hierarchy. The sheer force of things rendered her equal to her man" (87). What Davis points to is the historical root of Black women's degendered status, that is, the exclusion of Black women from both the myths and the realities of (white) womanhood, or what was typically referred to as the "cult of true womanhood." One thinks back to Dickerson's recitation of Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman* as another example of Black women being denied access to the myth of true womanhood. However, the quote performed by Ayana, just like Sojourner Truth with her speech, troubles the notion of Black women being degendered on slave plantations. To help me elucidate this point, I turn to the work of Venetria K. Patton. In her book, *Women in Chains: The Legacy of Slavery in Black Women's Fiction*, Patton advances the work of Black feminist scholars, namely Angela Y. Davis and Hortense Spillers, whose research examines the role of

Black women during the period of Black enslavement. Patton notes that both Davis and Spillers “present their arguments from the viewpoint of the slave masters” (xiii). Patton contends, however, that by inverting the lens of analysis from the slave master to the enslaved woman it would become apparent that “the slaves probably did not view themselves as degendered” (xiii). Patton continues,

despite the intentions of the master class, the degendering process was not perfectly realized. Although female slaves could not live by the cult of true womanhood practiced by their mistresses, they were not immune to its effects. Slave narratives record several instances of identification with white femininity.

With Patton’s argument in mind, the quote reveals the fact that the Black enslaved character in *Autobiography of a Female Slave* was well aware of and indeed embraced her femininity. So much so, that when she laments, “for modesty, so much commended in a white woman, is in a negro pronounced affectation,” the Black enslaved woman not only confirms her gendered status as a woman, but she is just as well cognizant that as a Black woman she will never receive the same respect or concern provided of white women.

While *Autobiography of a Female Slave* explores the complexities of Black women’s subjective experiences during the period of enslavement, there still remains the question of how the narrative is complicated vis-à-vis a white woman’s fictional writing. At the heart of the matter, Browne posed as a slave woman to tell a story about the atrocities of American enslavement. And though her written account, as well as her subsequent actions of freeing slaves, are commendable, one is curious about authorship: whose story is being told? And, what happens when a Black woman revives the narrative through performance?

The final segment, “Warrior Women,” depicts the experience of women within the American military. The first part of the segment emanates from a 2003 Photograph Portfolio Review— “Warrior Women”— by photographer Dan Winters that featured striking and distinguished photos of women in the military. The photos juxtaposed with the profiles clearly illustrates a celebration of women in the armed forces. This celebration is confirmed by the editorial that states, “If the United States goes to war with Iraq, it will do so with a greater percentage of women, in a greater array of positions, than at any other time in the history of the armed services” (“Warrior Women” 34). The editorial goes on to provide statistical data of how women’s presence in the military has increased since 1948. The article implies that women are equal to men within the military thus receiving the same treatments in all areas of duty. The profiles of the women featured in the portfolio, which initiates the segment, appear to corroborate this notion.

The “Warrior Women” segment begins with the prayerful performers reading the profiles of several of the women featured in the portfolio who, through their own words, celebrate their statuses and achievements as active military soldiers. For example, there is Frances C. Wilson, “the highest-ranking woman in the Marine Corps.” Prayerful performer Michelle reads a direct quote from Wilson’s profile: “My advice to a new female recruit would be that she is limited only by her imagination and willingness to try.” There is also “Rebecca, an “A-10 pilot. The only female pilot in her squadron.” Michelle and Maureen salute one another. Maureen then embodies Rebecca uttering that when it’s time for combat “You get your life in order, your relationships. We are ready to go tomorrow.” And then there’s drill sergeant Donna Braveboy who is played by Lisa. After saluting the other women, Lisa states: “I’m basically training them to be war dogs.

That's the state we're in." The "Warrior Women" portfolio attests to the notion that women should and do have equal access to the same opportunities afforded men within the armed forces. The portfolio, specifically the editorial, also attempts to dismantle the construction of gender by blurring the demarcated lines of gender. Portrayals of the armed forces within the media, however, often obfuscate the lived experiences of soldiers. Postcolonial and transnational feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty et al. maintain that "the reality reflected in their lives has been obscured by a continued emphasis in the US media and public debates that focuses only on women's need for protection or for the role as the supporter of male-instigated wars" (9). Precisely, when juxtaposed with the proceeding narratives, the women soldier's statements contradict the material realities that many women within the armed forces experience.

The next part of the segment shifts from celebrating women in the armed forces to lamenting the appalling experiences of women soldiers. For example, there is the story of Sharon Fullilove, a United States Air Force Academy cadet who quit after six months of training because she was sexually assaulted. The *New York Times* articles, "Women Recount Life as Cadets: Forced Sex, Fear and Silent," in which Fullilove's story emanates, clarifies that Fullilove was sexuality violated by a fellow male cadet. Lisa reads her story:

Like the other women accepted into the United States Air Force Academy, she was a star of her high school graduating class. Her academy application in 1999 including letters of commendation from President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore. But in November 1999, six months after entering the academy, she quit – devastated, from being raped.

Walonda joins and finishes Fullilove's story: "They tell you to expect getting raped, and if it doesn't happen to you, you're one of the rare ones. They

say if you want a chance to stay here, if you want to graduate, you don't tell. You just deal with it." Fullilove's case of sexual assault is not rare by any means. However, what makes her story unique is that she made her assault publicly known. For many women who are sexually violated—be it in the military or elsewhere—often do not come forward for a host of reasons including shame, guilt, and for fear of retribution. Social Activist and writer Leilani Dowell elaborates on the treatment women receive by superior officers and colleagues upon reporting incidents of sexual assault:

Often when women in the military do come forward to report assault, they are ridiculed, told to drop the issue, and even face heightened assault. IN addition, women who have been assaulted or raped in the military report poor medical treatment, lack of counseling, incomplete criminal investigations, and threats of punishments for reporting the assaults. (“Violence Against Women: The US War on Women” 219-220).

Political scientist Zillah Eisenstein provides a statistical overview to help actualize the rate of sexual assaults committed against active servicewomen.

Dozens of service women in the Persian Gulf area have claimed sexual assaults and rape by their fellow troops. During 2002-04 there were over one hundred reports of sexual misconduct in the Central Command Area – Iraq, Kuwait, and Afghanistan. [. . .] By 2004 at least thirty-seven servicewomen had sought sexual trauma counseling from civilian rape crisis organizations after returning from duty in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Kuwait. Eighty-eight cases of sexual misconduct were reported by the 60,000 women stationed in these areas. (“Resexing Militarism for the Globe” 39).

According to National Public Radio (NPR) host Michelle Norris, “Since 2002, the Miles Foundation — a private, nonprofit organization that tracks sexual assault within the armed forces — has received 976 reports of sexual assault in the Central Command Area of Responsibility, which includes Iraq and Afghanistan” (“Reported Cases of Sexual

Assault in Military Rise”). And we must keep in mind that these are only statistics of reported cases.

Service women also experience violence—whether sexual or otherwise—at the hands of opposing troops when captured and taken as prisoners of war. To explicate this point, *Identities on Trial* turns to the story of war captives Jessica Lynch, a 19-year old white woman, African American Shoshana Johnson, and Lori Ann Piestewa, the first American servicewoman and the first American Indian to die during the Iraqi conflict. Lynch, who was severely injured, was rescued after nine days of being held captive. Johnson was rescued after being held for 22 days. By highlighting these three women as prisoners of war, *Identities on Trial* exemplifies how race is not always the central factor when it comes to violence on women. But, rather, in some cases gender is the more influential factor. As Eisenstein argues, when it comes to the military, particularly during wartime, “women’s bodies become the universalized representation of conquest” (39). And, yet still we must remain cognizant that women who experience sexual assault in the military, or anywhere else for that matter, often do so because of their intersecting identity markers.

After a few select poems, including Emily Dickinson’s “Flags Vex a Dying Face,” Sharon Spencer’s “A Mayan Prophecy,” and the prayerful performers singing several verses of “Down By the Riverside,” where the prayerful performers bemoan, “I ain’t gon study war no more,” *Identities on Trial* closes with the words of Nahar Alam, a gender asylum seeker from Bangladesh. Each of the prayerful performers a line of the testimony:

You have just heard my testimony. It is also the testimony of thousands of women who have been silenced by male dominated cultures. Even after all

that has happened, I still have hope. We women are all here gathered together to improve the laws and situations for women. Let us unite and work together. Women united will never be defeated! We owe it to those whose voices have been silenced because they have been killed, we owe I to those whose voices are not heard because they are afraid to speak up.

In unison, the prayerful performers rejoice: “This is my life – never finished. Let’s stop violent acts against women, whenever and wherever in the world they may be. I thank you.” The closing speech, what Glenda Dickerson would call “a prayer for peace,” symbolizes both the importance and necessity for women to fight, collectively that is, against all acts of gendered oppression.

## Chapter Four

### Staging Black Women's History in *Sapphire's New Show: The Kitchen Table Summit*

#### Introduction

*Sapphire's New Shoe: The Kitchen Table Summit*, the final play in the *Kitchen Prayers Series*, was produced October 29, 2004 in the Duderstadt Center at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. A culminating performance, *Sapphire's New Shoe* commemorated the third anniversary of the tragedy of 9/11 while also marking the closing of *The Project of Transforming Thru Performing*. Unlike the first two plays, *Kitchen Prayers: A Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss* and *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer*, *Sapphire's New Shoe* was produced as a more fully-realized production rather than in the form of reader's style theatre. Both Walonda J. Lewis and Michelle McCullough returned as prayerful performers. Rhonda Williams-Bantsimba, who performed in the first play of the series, *Kitchen Prayers: Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss*, also returned as a prayerful performer in the last installment of the trilogy. The newly added cast members included Rhonda McLean-Nur, Kim Staunton, and Erica Tazel.

In her program note, Glenda Dickerson expresses that while the other two plays within the trilogy "work to give voice to women as diverse as Afghani and Japanese," with the final production "we have returned to our own unique voices, re/placing black womanly images" ("Director's Note"). *Sapphire's New Shoe* depicts primarily African American women, both historic and contemporary figures who have resisted stereotypical representations of Black womanhood as well as counterattacked oppressive conditions by turning their awareness into agency. Dickerson further states that with this play she has

two objectives: first, to celebrate Black women who have appeared in some sort of news media throughout unique periods of history and, secondly, to examine the status of Black women post-9/11, thus “reveal[ing] how the past and the present converge in Bush’s America” (“Director’s Note”). The play takes place at the fictional Mama Rice’s house on the Gulf Shores of Alabama on September 11, 2004. In addition to marking the 3-year anniversary of 9/11, the play is also situated during the midst of hurricane Ivan which is referenced throughout the play. The staple figures who remain throughout the entirety of the play are Mama Rice, Aunt Jemima, Condoleezza Rice, Constance Rice, Contrary Woman, and Bone Woman. The prayerful performers transform into the other characters with costumes throughout the play.

As each of the women show up to Mama Rice’s house, the audience is given a brief history lesson about her through direct narration from the character herself. The history lesson that each of the women brings with her is intertwined into a larger conversation, or rather a “kitchen table summit,” that covers a range of topics from women’s haircare products and American enslavement to voting rights for women and the tragedy of 9/11. These history lessons intrigue me most of all.

Like the other two plays in the trilogy, *Sapphire’s New Shoe* is structured in the form of segments or episodes. Each episode offers a meditation on an important moment within Black women’s history specifically, and African American history generally. *Sapphire’s New Shoe*, moreover, is evocative of one of Dickerson’s earlier works: *Re/membering Aunt Jemima: A Menstrual Show* (1992). Co-written with Breena Clarke (and Dickerson’s only published script), *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* resuscitates the minstrel form to examine Black woman’s subjectivity while simultaneously shattering

myths that converted into stereotypes of and about Black women (Anderson 35). The play presents Aunt Jemima, the mammy stereotype, and her 13 daughters—some based on real people and some mythic constructions—who collectively represent a legacy of Black women that have defied negative constructions of Black womanhood. Among the characters presented in *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* are: abolitionist Harriet Tubman, foremother of Black feminist thought Anna Julia Cooper, pioneering Black actress Dorothy Dandridge, and 19<sup>th</sup> century New Orleans voodoo priestess Marie Laveau. Author of *Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* Lisa Anderson explains that *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* is largely (and metaphorically) about “freeing Aunt Jemima from the box.” The meaning of the box is twofold: first, it represents a metaphorical box that Black women have historically been placed in vis-à-vis stereotypes such as the mammy, jezebel, sapphire, and other stereotypes that originated during the period of American Slavery.

The second meaning of the box is a literal one, accordingly denoting the pancake box (and syrup bottle) in which Aunt Jemima has been confined to since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. The image of Aunt Jemima that is used on the pancake box is “interchangeable with the “mammy” icon, the large, asexual, maternal house slave who was completely devoted to the master” (Anderson 38).<sup>37</sup> Additionally, Aunt Jemima on the pancake box and syrup bottle symbolizes Black women as domestic workers and inventors who have not received their rightful compensation. Aunt Jemima is freed from the box, she becomes cognizant that she is a “savvy, critical agent” (Anderson 38) that “grows and

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<sup>37</sup> While the image of Aunt Jemima changed over the years since 1989, the “happy mammy” and “ole mammy” symbol still remained ingrained within the American imaginary. For a lengthier history of Aunt Jemima and how the image shifted over the years, see Lorraine Fuller’s “Are We Seeing Things? The Pinesol Lady and the Ghost of Aunt Jemima.”

changes with her daughters” (40). To that point, Aunt Jemima is absolved of being a “reviled stereotype, a creation of white America” and she is recuperated, or rather re/membered as a “beautiful, strong, and noble” Black woman (54). Anderson maintains that *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* is “an exploration of black womanhood in the United States” (38). Likewise, scholar-dramaturg and playwright Kim Euell writes that Dickerson and Clarke’s play illustrates “the historical struggles of Black women in America over time” (“Signifyin(g) Ritual: Subverting Stereotypes, Salvaging Icons” 672). Theatre scholar Harry J. Elam, Jr. posits that *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* is “an attempt to write Black female identity into existence on the world stage” (*Colored Contradictions* 143). With the words of these scholar-critics in mind, one recognizes how *Re/membering Aunt Jemima* can be designated as a Black feminist recuperative history. I contend that *Sapphire’s New Shoe*, also conceived in the form of a Black feminist recuperative history, continues the work that Dickerson and Clarke initiated with *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*.

I maintain that both plays are exemplars of a Black history play.<sup>38</sup> In fact, I posit that *Sapphire’s New Shoe* echoes one of the earliest iterations of a Black history play: W.E.B. Du Bois’ *Star of Ethiopia*. Written in 1911 and first performed in 1913, *The Star of Ethiopia* depicts the history of African Americans. In making this claim, furthermore, I am reminded of Du Bois’ intent in using the arts, especially theatre, as a cultural force to revive Black history as it is often negated in traditional historical accounts. Du Bois urged for a theatre that illustrated African American history in his 1916 editorial in *The*

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<sup>38</sup> In reflecting on Dickerson’s oeuvre discussed at length in chapter 2, several of her creative works can be situated as history plays. Among them, I include *Eel Catching in Setauket: A Living Portrait of the Christian Avenue Community*, *Wellwater: Wishes and Words, A Living Portrait of Newark’s People*, *Ana Bel’s Brush: A Live Oak Drama*, and *Folksay: A Living Exhibit*.

*Crisis* magazine where he writes that his mission was “to get people interested in this development of Negro drama to teach on the one hand the colored people themselves the meaning of their history and their rich, emotional life through a new theatre” (171). Freda Scott Giles acknowledges that Du Bois’ admiration for theatre “was much more than interest or avocation to him; he encouraged its development in the African American community as a valuable weapon in its cultural and political propaganda arsenal” (*Black Theatre USA* 87). Dickerson, too, believed in the power of theatre as a cultural weapon that can help bring about social awareness as well as be a catalyst for change. A designated “Race Man” invested in the progression of Blacks by denouncing the dehumanizing and stereotypical traits in which they were often relegated to, Du Bois’ history play befittingly dramatizes the evolution of the Black race in America by examining “its work, its suffering, triumphs and hopes as an integral part of the human family” (*Washington Bee* 1).<sup>39</sup> Dickerson, however, pushes Du Bois’ concept and construction of a Black history play further as her play illuminates the complexities of race as well as gender, thereby evoking what is referred to in the Black feminist tradition as intersectionality. As such, Dickerson stages a genealogy of Black women and their contributions to American history, culture, and politics while also highlighting oppressive conditions that Black women have and continue to face.

David Krasner’s chapter, ““The Pageant is the Thing””: Black Nationalism and *The Star of Ethiopia*” from his important book *A Beautiful Pageant: African American*

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<sup>39</sup> The author of this review is unknown. However, in her essay, “Spirits in Black and White: Ethiopia as the Black Columbia in African American Pageantry,” specifically in a footnote, Lurana Donnels O’Malley notes that “This anonymous *Washington Bee* account (“Star of Ethiopia”) exactly matches the last five pages of a draft typescript (Du Bois, *Star of Ethiopia*, 1914), indicating that the article was written by Du Bois himself” (150).

*Theatre, Drama, and Performance in the Harlem Renaissance 1910-1927*, also proves fruitful in helping to elucidate the connections between Du Bois and Dickerson. In his analysis of Du Bois' pageant play, Krasner writes, "Each episode was designed to inspire admiration for black history by entertaining and calling attention to the historical record. The production joined dance, music, and historical reenactments of African history, the Middle Passage, slavery, emancipation, and Reconstruction in order to celebrate black uniqueness" (82). Likewise, *Sapphire's New Shoe* merges "episodic scenes, historical reenactments, music, grand spectacle, and generalized rather than detailed dramas" (86) to synthesize important moments within Black women's history. The point about "generalized rather than detailed dramas" is especially important to Dickerson's trilogy as a whole. In *Sapphire's New Shoe*, particularly in the episodes where a historic figure is introduced, the history lessons are brief thus offering just enough knowledge to inform the audience on why the character is important and to further entice the audience to learn more about the figure on their own.

In the following analysis of *Sapphire's New Shoe*, I examine how Glenda Dickerson stages Black women's history. Additionally, I point out certain moments where she signifies on W.E.B. Du Bois pageant-play as well as her play, *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*.

### **An Analysis of *Sapphire's New Shoe: The Kitchen Table Summit***

At the top of the play the audience is greeted by Mama Chimani Rice, a voodoo priestess who is played by Rhonda McLean-Nur. Although not explicitly stated, Mama Rice, as she is referred to throughout the play, is modeled after two voodoo priestesses – one a historical figure and the other a contemporary person. The first figure that Mama

Rice is modeled after is Marie Laveau (1801?-1881), a celebrated conjurer from New Orleans who was known for healing the sick and caring for the poor. The second inspiration for Mama Rice's character is Miriam Chimani, a modern-day voodoo priestess who practices conjuring in New Orleans. As Mama Rice speaks to the audience she informs them of the new-found interest in voodoo since 9/11: "Since 9/11, I get people from all walks of life, from street people to political leaders. They aren't looking for hexes or charms to make someone's nose fall off. As long as you're helping people get through difficult times, you're doing the work of Marie Laveau." The preceding dialogue is an actual quote from Miriam Chimani.<sup>40</sup> The character of Mama Rice symbolizes the controversial history of Black women as voodoo priestesses. In illustrating that folks are attentive to using voodoo culture to help them understand and process the tragedy of 9/11 denotes that voodoo culture is not a silent or forgotten practice, but that is indeed still alive and very much applied. Mama Rice performs a voodoo ritual that involves sprinkling holy water – a method to cleanse, purify, and offer protection of the space and for those within the space. The use of the holy water is a spiritual practice that derives from the merging of Catholicism and other African-derived practices.

One of the inspirations for *Sapphire's New Shoe* is the festival of the Boa Morte (translated as Our Lady of Good Death). Dickerson states, "I have taken a Brazilian ritual of life, death, and resurrection as my inspiration" ("Director's Note"). The sisterhood of the Boa Morte, whom are mostly elderly women, meet every year during Mid-August, dressed in their finest all-white attire and their finest jewelry, and for three days

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participate in Masses, public feasts, parades, and dances that honor the Virgin Mary (Selka). Journalist Joan Chatfield-Taylor reports:

On the surface, the festival is purely, ardently Catholic, but the reality is more complicated. The name of the festival refers not only to the good death of Mary, who, according to scripture, ascended into heaven, but to slaves who managed to become free during their lifetimes. The Catholic rites are only part of the celebration; there are other religious, social and political subtexts. (“Dance of Life to Honor Death” 10)

The “subtexts” that Chatfield-Taylor is referring to is the complicated history of the infusion of African, Latin American, and European culture – which is significantly recognized and embraced in New Orleans culture. Chatfield-Taylor goes on to explain that part of the complicated history is the merging of

orixás, the deities of Candomblé, the African-Brazilian religion that invokes spirituality through ritual dancing and trances. Candomblé and Catholicism have coexisted in the minds and hearts of many black Brazilians since the days when the Portuguese colonists required slaves to be baptized Catholic and to attend weekly Mass on their plantations. The slaves maintained their African traditions in secret ceremonies, disguising their orixás as Catholic saints. (10)

Mama Rice’s embodiment of Marie Laveau and Miriam Chimani and her role of conjuring “disparate women who end up having much in common” (Giles 144) symbolizes this complex history. Paying homage to the Boa Morte Sisters, all the prayerful performers are dressed in white and when they transform into different characters, they simply add on small adornments such as hats, scarves, and other props to signify a shift in character.

The next two characters to appear are Condoleezza Rice (played Kim Staunton), former National Security Advisor and Secretary of State during the Bush administration, and her cousin Constance “Connie” Rice (played by Michelle McCullough), a civil rights lawyer. The fictional character Aunt Jemima (Rhonda Williams-Bantsimba), who’s been

sitting at one of the dining tables since the start of the play, introduces the two women. Upon their arrival, the cousins immediately engage in a quarrel about 9/11 as Mama Rice helps each performer put on a costume element to indicate her transformation into her assigned character.

- Aunt Jemima: This is Condoleezza. Concert pianist. Competitive ice skater. Tutored in French and Spanish.
- Condoleezza: No one could have seen 9/11 coming. There was no silver bullet to warn us.
- Aunt Jemima: This is her cousin, Constance. Civil Rights Attorney. Director of the Advancement Project.
- Constance: Since September 11, the press has dropped to both knew before George W. Bush to take dictation.

Although there is no actual source to suggest that there was ever a quarrel between the two cousins, public or otherwise, it is a known fact that the two women are on opposite sides of the political lines. Throughout the play, the cousins bicker about 9/11 and the War on Terror. While Condoleezza Rice, a republican, was a supporter and major player in devising the plan for President Bush's War on Terror, Constance Rice, a democrat, has been one of the leading voices of dissent regarding President Bush's policies and his invasion into Iraq after 9/11. Constance confronts Condoleezza: "As soon as they got into office the Bush administration had a testosterone explosion. It sent America a cropper in Iraq. It alienated the allies. It infuriated the Iraqis. It built up hate and debate." The cousins also debate about matters regarding racial tensions in the country. For instance, Condoleezza professes that it was determination and focus that allowed her to become "the most powerful woman in Washington." As she later recalls to Constance, "I was barred from amusement parks just like you. Confined to segregated schools just like you.

Subjected to a presumption of inferiority just like you. Personal merit and hard work are more important in overcoming even virulent racism.” In her speech, Condoleezza is recalling the conservative notion of pulling one’s self up by the bootstrap even amid racial bias and discrimination. The cousin’s disparate positions illustrate that although Black women may not agree in politics, or other areas for that matter, they are still connected in particular ways that extends beyond mere familial relations.

Aunt Jemima, who serves as the play’s narrator, sarcastically introduces herself as “the prisoner in the box.” She then affirms, “I am not only a woman, I am a force of nature.” Her declaration is followed up with a short song: “no more auction block for me.” Aunt Jemima’s decree and song speak back to *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*, noting that she is now indeed free from both the slave plantation and free from being an imprisoned stereotype. Aunt Jemima’s role as narrator is important. When a historic figure arrives to dinner, Aunt Jemima announces her and then provides a snippet of knowledge about her before the figure speaks for herself and offer more contextualization of her history. In addition to her sporadic history lessons about each dinner guests, Aunt Jemima sings and delivers poetic verses throughout the play. All this to say, Aunt Jemima is the embodiment of Black women as agents of knowledge. According to Patricia Hill Collins, historically Black women have had to disseminate knowledge in ways that were out of the ordinary. As such, Black women’s intellectual works were produced through music, literature, poetry, storytelling, and other forms of oration (*Black Feminist Thought* 266-267). Aunt Jemima as producer of knowledge is an empowering position to hold; she is even more empowered when the subjects of her knowledge are indeed Black women. Being a producer of knowledge further substantiates Aunt Jemima as a free woman.

Furthermore, the role of Aunt Jemima as narrator is one that speaks back to Du Bois' Black history play as well as to the role of women narrators within history pageants. In her essay, "Spirits in Black and White: Ethiopia as the Black Columbia in African American Pageantry," Lurana Donnels O'Malley argues that early African American educational pageant performances featured "a central female Spirit as a guide or narrator" (131). To make her case she examines the following pageant-plays: *Star of Ethiopia* by W.E.B. Du Bois, *Two Races* by Inez M. Burke, *Out of the Dark* by Dorothy C. Guinn, *The Light of the Women* by Frances Gunner, and *Ethiopia at the Bar* by Edward J. McCoo.<sup>41</sup> Through her analysis of these pageant-plays, O'Malley posits that the "female figures – whether called Ethiopia, Spirit of Negro progress, Chronicler, or the Witch of Endor – were deliberately fashioned . . . as rejections of stereotypical black females of the era" (132). I contend that Aunt Jemima, too, functions in this capacity. As narrator, Aunt Jemima controls the stage, announces order of events, and retells history (133).

Aunt Jemima announces the arrival of the next guest: Contrary Woman (Walonda Lewis).<sup>42</sup> The real-life inspiration for Contrary Woman is civil rights activist and leader of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) Fannie Lou Hamer. This is discerned when Aunt Jemima declares the arrival of Contrary Woman, "She say something about she's gonna need more than two seats." The previous line is Signifyin' on the speech Fannie Lou Hamer made when she arrived at the 1964 Democratic National Convention and her camp was offered only two seats on the delegation floor.

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<sup>41</sup> All of the pageant-plays were compiled by Willis Richardson and published in his anthology, *Plays and Pageants from the Life of the Negro*.

<sup>42</sup> The term Contrary Woman was first introduced in *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*; not as a lone character but a term used to describe the women in the play.

Hamer famously declared: “We didn’t come all this way for no two seats, ‘cause all of us is tired” (Mills 5) Contrary woman enters Mama Rice’s house and greets the other dinner guests, “goddamn.” The others respond, “goddamn – goddamn.” They repeat the referential phrasing one again. Contrary Woman breaks off into song:

It’s a goddamn shame  
What they do to me  
What will it take  
To set me Free?  
Goddamn, goddamn.

The song, which is an adaptation of Nina Simone’s civil rights anthem “Mississippi Goddamn,” first appeared in *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*. The song speaks to the harsh realities of Black women’s health and the lack of concern from the healthcare industry.

Don’t read my pap smear  
For a year  
They finally tell me  
I’m filled with fear  
Cancer’s eating up my womb  
Mother Earth, you’ll be my tomb

What they do to me, Goddamn  
Hysterectomy, goddamn  
What they do to me, goddamn  
Clitoridectomy, goddamn  
What they do to me, Goddamn  
Mastectomy, goddamn  
Goddamn, Goddamn.

“These conditions,” according to Lisa Anderson, “are realities in the lives of Black women in the United States, who statistically receive poor health care and often do not receive medical intervention until the most radical procedures are necessary to save their lives” (*Black Feminism in Contemporary Drama* 46).

The next guest to arrive is The Bone Woman (Erica Tazel). According to Aunt Jemima, “Her job is to dig out the aftermath of the world’s massacres: the decayed

bodies, the skeletons and bones.” The character of Bone Woman was inspired by Clea Koff, a noted forensic anthropologist whose career catapulted when she was selected as a member of the first international forensic team brought together by the United Nations to investigate evidence of war crimes and other crimes against humanity. Her book, *The Bone Woman* (2004), details her experiences in recovering remains from massacres around the world including Rwanda, Bosnia, Croatia, and Kosovo. Bone Woman enters carrying a bust of Queen Nefertiti. In her speech she discusses the horrendous treatment of Queen Nefertiti’s tomb after her death, “Her name was erased from historical records. Her image defaced after death. The beautiful woman who came was despised for being calculating, cunning, queenly.” The entire cast sings, “it’s a goddamn shame what they do to me. What will it take to set me free?”

Mama Rice welcomes everyone and invites them to partake in drinks and hors d'oeuvres, or “what my grandmother called, onner-nerves.” The prayerful performers begin to pass out drinks and food-filled baskets to the audience while they sing “Will the Circle Be Unbroken.” Michelle takes center stage and engages the audience in dialogue. She asks, “Are we better off now than before 9/11?” The consensus among the audience is “no.” The first audience member to respond is Dr. Lundeana Thomas, a now-retired professor of theatre at the University of Louisville who also served as one of the scholarly participants throughout the entirety of *The Project*. “I have to go and get naked just to get on the plane.” Walonda poses another question, “Does anyone feel safe?” An unidentified male responds, “They definitely interrupted Oprah today to say that Osama Bin Laden is back.” One of the final comments from a young woman, “Sadly, we are seeing what it’s like to feel like what everybody else felt for so long.” Her comment is

interesting for she conveys the notion that because of 9/11, America is experiencing what countries around the globe experience daily – acts of terrorism, war, and the like.

The following segment serves as a lesson of notable Black women who have shaped and been shaped by history. Aunt Jemima announces their arrivals. The first to enter is Madam C.J. Walker (1867-1919), one of the first Black women self-made millionaires who found success selling hair-care products tailored for Black women. After Walker tells her story of how she “came from the cotton fields of the South,” to having “built my own factory on my own ground,” the women engage in conversation about Hannah Craft’s *Bondswoman’s Narrative*, “the earliest known novel by an enslaved woman anywhere.” The next woman to arrive is Jane Johnson (c.1814-1827 – 1872) whose story of being a slave woman that escaped to freedom with her children is recounted in Craft’s novel. After Jane Johnson tells her story of gaining her freedom, the women engage in frivolous conversation and the scene mocks of being in a beauty salon where Madame Walker is applying products to Mama Rice’s hair.

Befittingly, Bonnie Boswell, the journalist and documentarian who founded African American Women for Peace and Justice enters. Boswell’s organization is known for gathering at African American beauty salons and barbershops urging the clients to register to vote. Upon entering the scene, Boswell shares with the other women:

After 9/11, the idea of trolling for new voters in beauty salons and barbershops came to me while I was getting my hair done. People in other countries take their lives in their hands every time they vote, and we take it so for granted. It’s a uniquely American mind-set.

Aunt Jemima is reluctant to register for she admits that she has a felony record. This is a significantly important moment within the context of African American voter-registration. Specifically, Boswell dispels the myth that those who were formerly

convicted of a felony are unable to vote. Boswell speaks in private with Aunt Jemima: “If you are not in jail or in prison and you are not on parole, you can vote. Come on, let’s get you registered.”

In the following moment, the audience meets the Miller Sisters, former slaves. Annie and May Miller sit at the dining room table and chat with Mama Rice. Their story evidences the gruesome fact that although slavery was abolished in 1865, slave plantations remained well into the 1960s. The sisters, who were born in the 1930s and 1940s, tell their story.

Mae Miller:           picking cotton, pulling corn, picking peas, picking butter beans, picking string beans, digging potatoes. Whatever it was, that's what you did for no money at all.

Mama Rice:           How old were you when this started?

Mae Miller:           I was five when I was working.

Annie Miller:         It was so bad, I ran away. But they sent, told my brother they better come get me. I ran to a place even worse than where I were. But the people told my brothers, they go, 'You better go get her.' They came [and] got me and they brought me back. So, I thought Dad could do something about that," she said. "You know, I told him, said, 'I'm gonna run away again.' He said, 'Baby, don't run away. They'll kill us.' So, I didn't try it no more.

Mama Rice:           How old were you when you ran away?

Annie Miller:         I was nine.

Mama Rice continues to commune with the former slaves, offering them drinks and food.

When asked by Mama Rice why they didn’t tell anyone about what happened to them once they were free, Annie Miller queries why would anyone want to share their

experiences of being “raped over and over an’ that kind of mess.” She retorts, “Who would you tell? I don’t want to tell you, I don’t want to tell any nobody.”

Mae admits to thinking “everybody was in the same predicament. We didn’t know everybody wasn’t living the same life that we were living. We thought this was just for the black folks.” She hollers out, “I feel like my whole life has been taken.”

Aunt Jemima interjects to inform Mama Rice that Dr. Ruth Simmons has arrived for dinner. “President Ruth has initiated a reparations study at Brown University,” announces Aunt Jemima. Dr. Simmons, the first African American president of an Ivy League institution, expresses that her mission is to get the United States to rectify their wrongs with American enslavement: “What I’m trying to do, you see, in a country that wants move on I’m trying to understand how to feel good about moving on.” Dr. Simmons comments spark a hefty debate about the women.

Constance: I never got my 40 acres and a mule after the Civil War. Why shouldn’t there be some sort of payback?

Contrary Woman: Yeah!!! Payback

Condoleezza: Oh please. It’s been 140 years since Abraham Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation. At some point, what we as black people have got to do is stop looking in the rear-view mirror.

Contrary Woman: As the Contrary Woman States, “Still, George Bush has no business going over to Goree Island to talk about slavery. America is the place to talk about slavery.

Mama Rice: How do you calculate the interest on generations of slave labor? And to whom do you hand the bill?

Ruth: What about companies like Aetna who are still doing business. Among the first policies issues, 339 were upon the lives of Negro slaves.

- Mama Rice: Well, we have to ask ourselves if the US already enacted reparations by fighting a Civil War and outlawing slavery?
- Condoleezza: Yes, and by Lyndon Johnson's Great Society government programs like upward bound and head start.
- Contrary Woman: So, whom might you try to sue for slavery in America?
- Ruth/Constance: If you wear blue jeans, take out an insurance policy, if you buy from anyone who has a connection to the industries that were built on chattel labor, then you have benefited from slavery.

A central part of Dr. Ruth Simmons' mission is to break the silence of slavery and have a public dialogue on the history and contemporary effects of American enslavement. The story of the Miller sisters is a step towards breaking that silence.

Breaking the silence frames the next segment in the play. The next segment features a host of Black women who have appeared in the media to break the silence about some form of injustices be it domestic abuse, policies around gun laws, legacies of rape at the hands of white men, or dictatorships that have ravished third-world countries. These women include Essie Mae Washington-Williams (1925-1913), the bi-racial and secret daughter of South Carolina State Senator Strom Thurmond who was known for racist views and politics; long-time civil rights and women's rights activist Dorothy L. Height (1912-2010); and Denise Johnson, wife of one of the victims of the D.C. Beltway sniper who has vowed to take on the National Rifle Association for stricter gun policies. Additionally, Mildred Muhammad, former wife of the D.C. sniper, makes an appearance. She tells of the abuse she endured from her husband prior to his killing rampage. Contemporary writer Edwidge Danticot also makes an appearance from Haiti explaining

that she hitched a plane ride with Bessie Coleman (1892-1926), the first Black woman to receive a pilot's license. Danticot gives details on the devastations of Haiti noting that it is a "nation done in by dictators and disasters." Oprah Winfrey also appears to deliver a report on the disappearance of four-year-old Rilya Wilson, whom Oprah calls a "textbook example of what is wrong the department of children and families. Without the proper support, there will be hundreds of Rilya's out there." The segment concludes, however, with a moment of celebration for Black women in the media. Oprah Receives the Marian Anderson Humanitarian Award and it also made known that a new children's book has been published about Marian Anderson (1892-1926) which is an example of Black women's history being made available to a general audience.

Mama Rice rings a bell and announces that dinner is served. Mama Rice announces what is being served: barbecued chicken, fried chicken, turkey wings, collard greens mixed with kale, corn banana, pudding, lemon meringue pie, and peach cobbler. The list of foods the Mama Rice calls out is the same meal that Yvette Anderson would have made in her restaurant. Yvette Anderson was first introduced in *Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss*. She was a Black woman who died in the Twin Towers after it was hit by one of the airplanes hijacked by terrorists. By recalling her meal, *Sapphire's New Shoe* pays homage to Yvette Anderson. In fact, Mama Rice goes on to lead the prayerful performers in a ritual to "honor those Black women who have moved on to the realm of the ancestors since our last dinner together three years ago." The ritual is redolent of the ceremonies conducted by the Boa Morte sisterhood where they honor those who have died in the previous year. Gathered in a circle and with Mama Rice pouring libation, the prayerful members announce the list of

Black women artists who have taken their places as ancestors: Gloria Foster, Vinnette Carroll, Althea Gibson, Lynne Thigpen, Nina Simone, Celia Cruz, Shirley Scott, Isabel Sanford, and Beah Richards. One wonders if these were friends or colleagues of Dickerson's?

The prayerful performers also honor the ancestors whose remains were exhumed after the discovery of a lost African Burial Ground in Manhattan. After being exhumed and studied, the remains were reinterred in a section of the city Block now designated as the African Burial Ground Visitor Center. The prayerful performers also honor those who have been left in "Mass graves worldwide." As Bone Woman declares, "Restless spirits denied decent burial." Aunt Jemima sings "Will the Circle be Unbroken" as the remaining performs list-off in sync: Atlantic Ocean, Iraq, Zanzibar, Kosovo, Cambodia, Sri Lanka, Liberia, Bosnia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Guatemala, El Salvador, Chile, Argentina, Georgia, Ground Zero. The prayerful performers repeat the list, this time adding a line of dialogue from extemporaneous sources that attest to the tragedies endured.

Mama Rice:	Atlantic Ocean
Bone Woman:	The largest mass grave
Mama Rice:	Iraq
Condoleezza:	Gunned down in cold Blood
Mama Rice:	Zanzibar
Contrary:	The stench will not float
Mama Rice:	Kosovo
Constance:	The place was described as an evil place
Mama Rice:	Cambodia
Bone Woman:	She cried until she died
Mama Rice:	Sri Lanka
Condoleezza:	Bring his body to me
Mama Rice:	Liberia
Condoleezza:	I will recognize his bones
Mama Rice:	Bosnia
Contrary Woman:	You can smell the dead bodies
Mama Rice:	Nigeria
Bone Woman:	They buried them alive

Mama Rice:	Rwanda
Constance:	The skulls had holes in the back of the head
Mama Rice:	Guatemala
Constance:	As if they had been shot
Mama Rice:	El Salvador
Contrary Woman:	The crying was disturbing at first
Mama Rice:	Chile
Condoleezza:	Everything is dark red
Mama Rice:	Argentina
Constance:	Desperate families try to dig up the site themselves
Mama Rice:	Georgia
Bone Woman:	It's like déjà vu all over again
Mama Rice:	Ground Zero
All:	All have their own individual history, but together testify to decades of mass murder.

The honoring of ancestors closes with the prayerful performers paying homage to the Saartjie Baartman, a South African Khoikhoi woman who was exploited by being paraded naked in circuses in France and England during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Specifically, the performers honor the fact that her remains, which were held in a French museum, were finally returned to South Africa for burial. As the cast members lament, “If the ancestors are not buried they cannot be blessed. And Auntie Saartjie is home.”

In the final segment of the play, *Sapphire's New Shoe* returns to a topic explored in the previous play, *Identities on Trial*: global acts of gendered war and oppression. The dialogue for this section is pulled from the United Nations documents of the Rwandan War Crimes Tribunal and other sources. The prayerful performers transform into a host of survivors of rape, child molestation, modern-day slavery, and genital mutilation. One of the major moments in this segment is the story of Pauline Nyiramasuhuko, known as the Minister of Rape, who was charged and convicted to life imprisonment for orchestrating war crimes and other crimes against humanity mainly in the form of rape against Tutsi women by Hutu men during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. *Sapphire's New*

*Shoe* dramatizes a fictional encounter where the surviving women gather around Nyiramasuhuko and force her to listen their accounts of being sexually tortured. Nyiramasuhuko, however, claims her innocence: “My very job was the preservation, education and empowerment of Rwanda’s women. Now, I am charged with crimes against humanity in an international court. I feel helpless. I am not guilty of these terrible crimes.” Constance and Condoleezza engage in conversation about the Minister of Rape. Neither condone her actions, but it is Constance who asks an intriguing question: “With so many men behind the Rwandan atrocities, why does the media single out a woman as a unique monster?” In answering her own question, Constance points out that fact that although women have and do participate as perpetrators of these vicious crimes, often women and girls are forced to participate where the risk of resisting is their own safety.

As the play comes to a close, the prayerful performers decry, “We can’t just cry. Everywhere in the world there are women crying. We have to fight back. If you are going to rape us, rape us now, because this must stop.” The performers then gather into a circle and perform a ring shout while singing a traditional ring shout hymn, “Oh Lord, Knee Bone Bend.” Historian Sterling Stuckey notes,

Wherever in Africa the counterclockwise dance ceremony was performed – it is called the ring shout in North America – the dancing and singing were directed to the ancestors and gods, the tempo and revolution of the circle quickening during the course of the movement. The ring in which Africans danced and sang is the key to understanding the means by which they achieved oneness in America. (*Going through the Storm: The Influence of African American Art in History* 12)

Stuckey’s notion of “oneness” is substantiated during the prayerful performer’s ring shout when Mama Rice shouts “We are,” which is followed by her listing a host of African tribes such as Fulani, Wolof, Akan, Ashanti, Mende, and others, signifying that

Black women are one in the same regardless of the individual tribes in which they originate. As a chorus, the prayerful performers declare, “It’s a goddamn shame what they do to me. But I’m here to tell you, I’m goddamn free.” Before the stage lights fade to black, the prayerful performers turn around, lift their skirts and expose their bare bottoms to the audience. This final act of resistance by the prayerful performers is borrowed from the women of Swaziland, a region in Southern Africa. According to Giles, this act in Swaziland is a “show of denunciation of the failure of their leaders to govern wisely” (“Glenda Dickerson’s Nu Shu” 145). In performing this act, the prayerful performers demonstrate their resistance to historical acts of oppression. Moreover, this act demonstrates that it is in the collective-solidarity of women all over the world that can initiate and solidify peace and justice.

## Chapter Five

### **Staging Black History in *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure***

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I examine Glenda Dickerson's final work: *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*, in which she co-wrote with Lynda Gravátt. *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* stages the life and legacy of politician, lawyer, professor, and trailblazer Barbara Jordan (1936-1996). Through the life of Jordan, moreover, the play provides an account of African American life and history during the mid-21<sup>st</sup> century where racial upheaval was at an all-time high but Black Americans remained vigilant and strong in their determination to become a part of America's social and political fabric. Like many African American history plays, *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* elucidates on the trials and tribulations of what it means to be Black in America. In this chapter, I first offer background context on how the play came to be conceived through Glenda Dickerson's friendship with co-author Lynda Gravátt. I then discuss the importance of the play as a Black feminist-solo drama. Finally, I offer an analysis of the play where I contend that Barbara Jordan's personal narrative simultaneously conjures a lesson in African American history.

#### **Conceiving *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure***

During our interview, actress Lynda Gravátt says that for a long time she's admired political Barbara Jordan. Remarking that Jordan stood as a "beacon of light during the Watergate hearing," Gravátt states, "I remember being enchanted and astounded by the brilliance of this black woman. So, I listened to everything she had to say during that period" (Gravátt). Some years later while traveling to Houston, Texas as

she had been cast in Alley Theatre's production of *The Young Man from Atlanta*<sup>43</sup> by

Horton Foote, Gravátt expresses that her admiration of Jordan had been reinvigorated:

When I got off the plane in Houston doing *The Young Man from Atlanta* the entire airport in Houston was just a series of murals and wall writings and pictures and things of Barbara Jordan in a way that had not been expressed by the rest of the country and so I realized Barbara Jordan was from Houston. So, I approached the managing director at the time of the Alley Theatre about doing a piece about Barbara Jordan. While I was doing *The Young Man from Atlanta*, I was also touring a piece called *Harriet's Return* for the education department and I said: I'm really interested in writing a piece for young people about Barbara Jordan because I think it would be interesting because as the years have passed of course she has become less and less a presence in these children's minds. (Gravátt)

Gravátt's pronouncement of Jordan becoming "less and less a presence" is quite a significant statement. Whereas Gravátt directed the statement to children, thus questioning the historical figures they are familiar with and how they come to learn about such figures, I contend that the sentiment of her statement applies to people of all ages.

When I first began researching and writing this chapter, I was curious to know if current college students – both undergraduate and graduate students – were familiar with the famed politician, lawyer, and former professor at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at The University of Texas at Austin. To answer my query, I walked around the campus of the University of Maryland, College Park and asked friends, colleagues, and students who were enrolled in the courses I was teaching: have you ever heard of Barbara Jordan? If the answer was no, there was no need to continue. However, if the answer was yes, I proceeded with a follow-up question: Do you know why Barbara Jordan was such an instrumental figure as it relates to race? Gender? And politics?

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<sup>43</sup> The Alley Theatre's production of Horton Foote's *The Young Man from Atlanta* was produced February 16, 1996 to March 16, 1996.

Interestingly, many knew that Jordan was a politician and most slightly referenced that she was a “first” to do something within the arena of politics. However, no one could tell me specifically what Jordan had done and/or why she was considered one of the most influential Black women within contemporary American history.<sup>44</sup>

How is it that such a trailblazing Black woman in American history and politics not be remembered? How does she become erased? Feminist scholar and political activist Barbara Omolade encapsulates my questions within the following statement:

History books and social scientific studies about Black women have yet to capture, touch, or transmit their historical experiences and visions with the truth and depth of the poetry, songs, and novels written by Black women about Black women. The Black woman is certainly a historical being, but where is her history? Where are the books for high school and college reading that tell her story? Where are the lengthy discussions about her political philosophy, her religious theology, her sociological methods? How did she become so central, yet so invisible; so outspoken, yet so silenced? (“The Silence and the Song: Toward a Black Woman’s History through a Language of her Own” 283)

Noteworthy in Omolade’s statement is not so much the fact that Black women have a history, but more so the fact that Black women’s histories continue to go un(der)studied and therefore they become hidden figures. *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* (hereinafter *Texas Treasure*) is Glenda Dickerson and Lynda Gravatt’s evocation of Barbara Jordan’s life and history. Precisely, the collaborators have written a drama that elucidates Barbara Jordan’s introduction into politics by shedding light on the election that would change the course of her life forever: Jordan’s 1966 bid for a seat in the Texas House of Representatives.

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<sup>44</sup> Interestingly, at the time of my writing this chapter, *The Washington Examiner* published an editorial by W. James Antle III with the following headline: “Trump should want Barbara Jordan’s immigration debate, not Joe Arpaio’s.” Although a conservative newspaper, the op-ed piece concretizes the importance of Jordan’s political career by reminding readers of her astute attention to immigration reform.

Although Gravátt initially thought of the idea to write an entertaining and enlightening drama about Jordan, she insisted that Dickerson take lead as dramatist. Gravátt had known Dickerson since her days at Howard as she earned a BFA from Howard University in 1971, performing in many works directed and/or conceived by Dickerson. Even more emphatically, Gravátt was exceptionally familiar with Dickerson's work where she aimed to celebrate those "not as celebrated as we feel they should have been [...]" particularly those Black women who have not been heard about or sung about" (Gravátt). For example, Gravátt portrayed Rachel Holland Hart in Dickerson's *Eel Catching in Setauket* (see Chapter One). Knowing this background information, one understands why Gravátt insisted on Dickerson co-authoring *Texas Treasure* – a play that remembers a Black woman pioneer. During our interview, Gravátt recalls a telephone conversation with Dickerson:

I said to her: 'Sister, listen, I'm doing this piece on Barbara Jordan. I can be in the play, but I don't want to write the play. You know so much; I can come up with the ideas and the research. And I'll do all the grunt work, but we need to sit down together and try to come up with the play.' So, she said: 'Of course, sister, let's do it.' So, then she came down to Houston. We met down there one summer. I'd given her all the research I'd done. Then she and I sat down together over the period of about a year putting together the information I had gotten and visiting the schools and all of the places she had been and such as that. Then we started coming up and seeing the ideas of the play where the students would actually vote for her and send her to Texas State Representatives. (Gravátt)

Implied in Gravátt's statement above, *Texas Treasure* takes place at a fictional campaign rally where Barbara Jordan is vying for the support of the audience. Written as a solo-drama, Jordan (played by Gravátt in the early run of for the production)<sup>45</sup> speaks

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<sup>45</sup> In conducting research for this chapter, I found inconsistencies with sources regarding production dates. In her essay, "Glenda Dickerson's Nu Shu," Freda Scott Giles writes that Dickerson and Gravátt began working on the play in 2005. This seems logical because the script I received was dated for "Winter 2006." A *Houston Chronicle* editorial by journalist Flori Meeks, dated February 21, 2001, confirms that Gravátt's

directly to her constituents telling her life-story from childhood to the moment she wins the 1966 election sending her to the Texas State Senate. Although *Texas Treasure* is centered around a vital moment in Jordan's political career, the historical drama is layered with an abundance of overt nods to African American history and culture. For instance, *Texas Treasure* makes mention of the iconic moment in 1955 wherein Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. The play also sheds light on Black cultural practices, such as church Baptisms, that have sustained Black existence and survival amid white oppression. Putting this all into perspective, Jordan's narrative doubles as a site both for Jordan's personal history specifically, and African American cultural history generally. As such, this chapter aims to examine how Barbara Jordan's citational practice synchronously functions as a vessel that guides the audience through a tunnel of African American history and culture.

Before moving forward, it is important that I discuss my understanding of citational practice.<sup>46</sup> My understanding of citational practice is largely informed by sociologist Ervin Goffman. In his book, *Forms of Talk*, Goffman introduces the term "embedded capacity," what he describes as "our linguistic ability to speak of events at any remove in time and space from the situated present" (3). Contextualizing Goffman's notion of citational practice, Jane E. Goodman et al. declare that embedded capacity is

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did reach out to the Alley Theatre about commissioning a play for the Living History Series program that would center on the life of Barbara Jordan. According to Meek's editorial, however, the play was first produced at various Houston, Texas high schools in February 2000 for Black History Month and then retoured in January 2001. It is also confirmed that Lynda Gravátt portrayed Barbara Jordan and the performance was directed by Glenda Dickerson. The script that I received from The Alley Theatre denotes that during the Winter 2006 high school tour, Barbara Jordan's character was played by a performer named Autumn – no last name was provided.

<sup>46</sup> In thinking of citational practice as it is actualized in drama, I am reminded of W.B. Worthen's essay, "Citing History: Textuality and Performativity in the Plays of Suzan-Lori Parks," where he examines how history functions in Parks' dramas. Worthen maintains that citational practice is enacted through "footnotes, extracts, and lectures" that "emphasize the textual character of "history"" (5).

“the premise that discourse can embed other discourse” (“Citational Practices: Knowledge, Personhood, and Subjectivity” 450). Take, for instance, when Jordan discusses her attending Texas Southern University, an historically Black University (HBCU), she evokes a larger discourse regarding the history of racial discrimination within higher education. As Jordan laments within the play, this history of racial discrimination not only colored her experience as a college student, but it gave her a greater understanding of the American education system as it relates to Jim Crow laws, specifically *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This example marks another important factor when it comes to citational practice. Accordingly, “citational practices allow individual subjects to locate themselves in relation to wider formations of cultural knowledge” (455). As my analysis will show, the shaping of Jordan’s personhood and subjectivity was influenced by the very cultural history she cites throughout her narrative.

### **Solo Drama as (Black) Feminist Performance**

In addition to her illustrious career as a politician, lawyer, and college professor, Barbara Jordan was celebrated for her eminent talent as an orator. In fact, when Jordan delivered the keynote address at the 1976 Democratic National Convention – marking her the first African American and first woman to do so – she was partly celebrated for her remarks on equality for all American people, but her reputation took on another level of acclamation because of her impressive rhetorical skills. Remarking on Jordan’s gift for public speaking immediately following her death, political reporter Molly Ivins states in an interview with Civil Rights activist and cultural commentator Charlayne Hunter-Gault:

The oratory was a matter of skill. I mean, her diction, her precise enunciation she got from her daddy, who was a parish preacher. The voice, of course, came from God. And I think the really stunning thing about her rhetoric was that she used words with the same precision that a

master stone mason used when he makes a wall. She chose words so carefully to build thoughts, and never put a word out of place. If you were quoting her, you had to quote her exactly, because if you tried to substitute a word of your own, you'd mess up the whole thing. ("The First and Only")

Therefore, it comes as no surprise that Dickerson and Gravátt would write a drama where Jordan delivers a speech to an audience. Ruminating on Jordan as an orator – both in real life and as the sole character in *Texas Treasure* – sparks several interesting points within the context of Black feminism.

Thus, it is important to call attention to a compelling element of Black feminism that frames the entire play which is the fact that Jordan is given the space to tell *her* life story. Historically, Black women have been denied access to speak particularly when it comes to articulating their histories, as well as their subjective experiences. As stated in the Combahee River Collective, a foundational manifesto for Black feminism, "we were told in the same breath to be quiet both for the sake of being "ladylike" and to make us less objectionable in the eyes of white people" (274). Accordingly, one of the major tenets of the Black feminist movement was to create space for Black women and other women of color to "talk back," to use the words of black feminist scholar and cultural critic bell hooks. For as hooks puts it, "Daring women to speak out, to tell our stories has been one of the central life transforming aspects of feminist movement" (*Talking Back*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition x).

Another interesting point is the use of solo performance. Several scholars have discussed the use of solo performance as a feminist theatre practice.<sup>47</sup> However, in most

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<sup>47</sup> For more on solo performance as feminist theatrical practice, see Jill Dolan's *Utopia in Performance*, Ryan Claycomb's *Lives in Play*, and Gregory Dawson's dissertation, "The Nineteenth Century Origins of Feminist Solo Performance."

of these studies the scholars are focusing on live performance art, performance poetry, and other non-traditional modes of performance. Nonetheless, the elements of feminist theatrical practice often carry over from form to form – be it live performance art or scripted dramas – as it relates to solo performances. Theatre historian Esther Kim Lee explains:

For feminist performers, solo performance provided a powerful mode of representation through which to expose personal material in public. Preconceived notions of women and womanhood were not enacted or portrayed, but rather, women were themselves on stage. By being themselves on stage, the performers broke taboos and silences repressing women, using the theme, “personal is political,” in their performances. And, they took control over their bodies and gained the right to write about themselves, thereby winning the right to rewrite history and reveal truths about womanhood. Audiences were witnesses to the performers’ detailed confessions and revelations of their private lives, and the sharing of the “unspeakable” empowered all those involved and gave them voice. (“Between the Personal and the Universal” 293-294)

Lee indicates a very important element within feminist solo performances that is quite apropos to *Texas Treasure*. That is, the use of real, materially grounded history through the staging of “truths, confessions, and revelations,” to recognize women as subjective agents.

Returning back to *Texas Treasure* and the significance of Jordan as orator, feminist theatre scholar Elaine Aston offers an analyses of Black women solo performers that highlights orality as a tradition within the African diaspora. And though Aston is mainly talking about performance poetry, her focus on staging Black women’s narratives is especially applicable to *Texas Treasure*. Aston maintains that Black women artists stage narratives that “represents a way of challenging the Eurocentric ‘grand narratives’ of the stage, and for Black female spectator offers an affirmation of her ‘sense of self’, by making visible the ‘colonial landscape’ of a culture and history she carries with her” (*An*

*Introduction to Feminism and Theatre* 91). In this sense, Barbara Jordan – as a character in the play – takes up the role of what Omolade calls a Griot Historian (283-285). With *Texas Treasure*, Jordan’s narrative not only demarcates the beginning of her political career, but perhaps gives insight to the subjective experiences of other Black women politicians whose lives in politics are often excluded from the grand narrative for their careers are often shaped by, and reflect, the material conditions of race, gender, and class.

Performance Studies scholars E. Patrick Johnson and Ramón H. Rivera-Servera also write about Black women solo performers. In the introduction to their anthology, *Solo/Black/Woman: Scripts, Interviews, and Essays*, they write, “Even though the solo performer appears to be the only body on the stage, she is never alone” (xvii). Johnson and Rivera-Servera’s comments are quite noteworthy for they bring into focus the concept of “womanism,” thus distinguishing one of its central tenets: community. As Layli Phillips (now Maparyan) denotes, womanism is a “social change perspective rooted in Black women’s and other women of color’s everyday experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people. . .” (“Introduction,” *The Womanist Reader* xx). A survey of the literature on Jordan’s life in politics illustrates a direct correlation with womanism precisely as Jordan became a national spokesperson for marginalized Black communities (Aghahowa; Haskins; Rogers; et al.).

### ***An Analysis of Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure***

At the very top of the play Jordan makes it clear that serving as a voice for her community was her main objective: “I want to represent you and your family in the Texas State senate” (2). As she continues, Jordan states directly to the audience “I ran a

race in 1962. You endorsed me and I lost. I ran a race in 1964. You endorsed me and I lost” (2) referring to her candidacy for the Democratic nomination for state representative. Although Jordan lost the first two elections, her statement substantiates the importance of community within political affairs. In fact, Jordan ran for the second time because she felt nothing had been done about the issues plaguing her community since the first time she ran for office. As observed in her real 1964 announcement speech, Jordan was cognizant that poor Black communities in Houston were being left behind as the city began to prosper:

“It is urgent that the legislature become more responsive to the needs of the people of Texas. Skilled lobbyists speak for every kind of interest except that of the average citizen. The real need is to make it possible for all Texans to become more productive. Education, job training, and the elimination of the burden of discrimination will help.” (quoted in Haskins 42)

Returning to the play, Jordan ensures the audience of her of commitment to the people of Houston, Texas and just as well a commitment to her Texas origin:

I want you to know I have no intention of losing this time. I don’t like losing. There is something wrong with losing. I had considered abandoning a political career in Texas and moving to a part of the country where a black woman candidate is less likely to be a novelty. But, I couldn’t. I am a Texan. My roots are in Texas. To leave would be a cop out. So, I’m going to try to lay out for you why I am the only candidate who can make sure your voice is heard in the Texas senate. (2)

In this passage, Jordan signifies the black feminist/womanist concept of intersectionality.

In calling out the ways in which her identity markers crisscross – namely her race and gender – Jordan subsequently denotes what race-woman Anna Julia Cooper wrote in her often-cited monograph, *A Voice from the South*, an early black feminist text published 72 years prior to Jordan’s third political campaign. Cooper, a womanist in her own right, contends that Black women are situated in “a unique position in this country,”

consequently finding themselves “confronted by both a woman question and a race problem” (134). Cooper does more than speculate on the plight of Black women; she directly calls out the forces that attempt to disempower them. Those forces include not only white men and women, but Black men as well specifically as they promoted patriarchy through their narrow views of Black womanhood. As the passage above shows, Jordan, like Cooper, refuses to be disempowered as she opts to stay in Texas and be a voice for the people of her community. Jordan was well aware that her winning the election would mean a series of firsts. That is, Jordan would be the first Black state senator in modern times and the first black woman senator from Texas. In this sense, Jordan embodies many of Cooper’s ideals, particularly Cooper’s most often quoted phrase, “Only if the black woman can say “when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (31).

Jordan instructs the audience to look at the brochure given to them upon entering the theatre. Signaling the audience to look at the picture of a junkyard, Jordan shares that the junkyard was owned by her Grandpa Patten, “my mother’s father” (2). Jordan’s grandfather, John Ed Patten, was one of her greatest inspirations. In fact, in the autobiography Jordan elaborates on how Grandpa Patten implied that she was closely akin to himself, denoting that she was ‘quite different, just a little cut above the ordinary man, black or white” (*Barbara Jordan, A Self-Portrait* 8). Imbedded within his catchphrases were life lessons that Jordan would carry with her and refer to for inspiration and reassurance for as Grandpa Patten’s own life was indeed a lesson of sorts, especially when it came to race and the plight of Black Americans. Linda Ferreira-

Buckley writes, “Despite the injustices and cruelties he had suffered – framed by racist police officers, he’d spent years in prison before the guilty verdict was reversed – Patten never lost his strong sense of self and continued to love humanity” (“Remember the World is Not a Playground but a Schoolroom”198). And, yet, Grandpa Patten was sure to not “romanticize it, nor did he refrain from judging it” (198) for his own experiences made him acutely aware of systemic injustices. It was Grandpa Patten that taught Jordan self-sufficiency, responsibility, and accountability.

Grandpa Patten was quite successful in his junkyard business. Jordan tells the audience that Grandpa Patten hired her as his business partner, employing her to keep hold of the money earned from selling merchandise. “He gave me a money belt, which had a little zipper. You wore it under your clothes and around your waist. So, I always had money. Cause you see, I was in business” (2). Here Jordan cites an extremely important factor within a larger context of Black history which is entrepreneurship. And who better to impart knowledge of entrepreneurship than Grandpa Patten who in addition to his junkyard also owned and operated a restaurant and a confectionery store. As Jordan states in her auto-biography, “He never wanted a boss, and always wanted to be his own boss” (*Barbara Jordan, A Self-Portrait* 4).

For black folk, entrepreneurship was not simply a means for economic development and sustainability. As economist and political scientist Joseph Schumpeter puts it, entrepreneurship, through the efforts of what he calls a “creative capitalist,” is boosted by “the will to conquer, the impulse to fight, to prove oneself superior to others, to succeed for the sake, not of the fruits of success, but of success itself” (*Theory of Economic Development* 93). From a black cultural standpoint, Black entrepreneurship –

regardless of the size of the company or gross profit – can be viewed as a way to oppose systemic and structural racial oppression.<sup>48</sup> And while economic freedom is a major factor within this act of opposition, “financial result is a secondary consideration” (93). A primary consideration for Black folk endeavoring to own their own business – sequentially forging their own paths in life – is that it offers a sense of autonomy and empowerment.

As Jordan recollects, Grandpa Patten imparted her with a number of idiosyncratic proclamations:

In those days I had an extreme dedication to playing. And I did play hard. But grandpa kept telling me, “Just remember, life is not a playground but a class room.” He didn’t want me to be like the other kids. That came through loud and clear. He said, “you just trot your own horse.” (3)  
Like many of the idioms Jordan recites throughout the play, Dickerson and

Gravatt pulled Grandpa Patten’s quotes directly from Jordan’s autobiography. Couched in a vernacular speech that is coded through figurative language, Grandpa Patten’s expressions are indicative of what several scholars of African American rhetoric and culture have dubbed the practice of signifying.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr., a renowned scholar of African American literature and culture, has written considerably on “signifying” in his highly regarded study *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. In his study Gates acknowledges that there is no “consensus of definitions of signifyin(g)” (89). To that point, Gates draws on the work of several pioneering scholars whose works has shaped the ways in which signifying is taken up within an interdisciplinary context. For instance,

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<sup>48</sup> See *Market Women: Black Women Entrepreneurs-Past, Present, and Future* By Cheryl A. Smith, and *The History of Black Business in America: Capitalism, Race, Entrepreneurship* (volume 1, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition) by Juliet E. K. Walker.

in recognizing the work done by folklorist Robert Abrahams and anthropologist Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Gates writes, “Signifyin(g), in other words, is the figurative between the literal and the metaphorical, between the surface and the latent meaning [. . .] Finally, Signifyin(g) presupposes an encoded “intention” to say one thing but to mean another” (89).

Furthermore, signifying as a trope within African American culture cannot be discussed without recognizing its larger diasporic connections. Accordingly, Gates et al. make a cultural connection between Esu-Elegbara (a trickster figure who serves as messenger between God and man) and the Signifying Monkey, the Pan-African cousin of Esu-Elegbara. Esu-Elegbara, as explained by Gates, is the “Yoruba figure of the meta-level of formal language use, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation” (7). Conducting itself in the same manner, the Signifying Monkey is the African American equivalent to Esu-Elegbara. The Signifying Monkey, Gates explains, is the

figure of a black rhetoric in the Afro-American speech community. He exists to embody the figures of speech characteristics to the black vernacular. He is the principle of self-consciousness in the black vernacular, the meta-figure itself. Given the play of doubles a work in the black appropriation of the English-language term that denotes relations of meaning, the Signifying Monkey and his language of Signifyin(g) are extraordinary conventions, with signification standing as the term for black rhetoric, the obscuring of apparent meaning. (59)

Indeed, Grandpa Patten embodies the Esu-Elegbara/Signifying Monkey figure as he conveys to his granddaughter indirect lessons of Black American life through doublespeak. For instance, with the line “Just remember, life is not a playground but a class room,” Grandpa Patten instructs Jordan about the hardships of Black life, especially

advising that because Blacks have been so impacted by racial turmoil that one must always be cognizant of the historical manifestations of prejudice and discrimination.

Grandpa Patten's second statement, "you just trot your own horse" returns us to the earlier discussion of Black entrepreneurship. In fact, it is quite indicative of Schumpeter's notion of the entrepreneur as a "decision-maker," nothing that being an entrepreneur "does not essentially consist of either inventing anything or otherwise creating the condition which the enterprises exploit. It consists in getting things done" (135). Beyond entrepreneurship, Grandpa Patten's expression was about autonomy and agency. In fact, it could be argued that Grandpa Patten influenced Jordan with ideals that in today's milieu would be considered feminist. In *Self-Portrait*, Jordan shares how her Grandfather was not fond of Jordan's father, Ben Jordan, as he felt that he halted his daughter, Arlyne Jordan, from a life of opportunities beyond domestic duties. For instance, Jordan writes in her autobiography that Grandpa Patten would say, "Do not take a boss. Do not marry. Look at your mother" (20).

As the play continues Jordan remembers two institutions from her formative years that helped to shape her life. The first institution is the Black church. Jordan recalls the day of her baptism at Good Hope Missionary Baptist Church where she was led by her mother to a basement dressing room and met with a group of ladies awaiting her with a white sheet and a swimming cap. Jordan describes that after dressing for the ceremony, "they had pushed back the picture of John baptizing Jesus in the river Jordan," and awaiting her was Reverend Lucas "in tall rubber boots and a black robe" (3). After Jordan joined Reverend Lucas in the water he proceeded to perform the baptism as he "put his left hand on my shoulder, and, holding up his other hand, said "In obedience to the Great

Head of the Church, I baptize you, My Sister, in water”” (3). In recalling her baptism, Jordan offers a wider testament to how religion/spirituality through ritual plays a significant role within African American culture.

Religion/spirituality is a dramaturgical trope that is ever-present in Black theatre, from early twentieth century anti-lynching drams to the contemporary plays of August Wilson.<sup>49</sup> For instance, in his analysis of Wilson’s oeuvre, theatre scholar Harry J. Elam, Jr. contends that “The embrace of the spiritual, the engagement in what one would call “faith-based” cultural practices – in that they foreground spiritual commitment – serve Wilson’s Africans in America as critical survival strategies” (*The Past as Present* 167). Elam’s articulation certainly applies to many Black plays that call attention to religion/spirituality. As such, it is common for religion/spirituality within African American dramas to be typified through the Black church. Obviously, the Black church is a space for connection with a divine order, but for Black folk the church has served as much more. To quote W.E.B. Du Bois, “The Negro church of today is the social center of Negro life in the United States. . .” (*Souls of Black Folk* 142). Milton C. Sernett contextualizes Du Bois when he writes that the Black church “had to be social centers, political forums, school houses, mutual aid societies, refuges from racism and violence, and places of worship” (*African American Religious History* 4). Both Du Bois and Sernett point out the ways in which the church, and other Black religious institutions for

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<sup>49</sup> In his book *Staging Faith: Religion and African American Theater from the Harlem Renaissance to World War II*, Craig Prentiss analyzes how religion/spirituality “figures prominently in more than three-quarters of the twenty-five available antilynching scripts written by African Americans through 1941. . .” (74). With *Living with Lyching: African American Lynching Plays, Performance, and Citizenship, 1890-1930* and in the introduction to *Strange Fruit: Plays on Lynching by American Women*, Koritha Mitchell and Judith Stephens (now Stephens-Lorenz), respectively, explore how antilynching dramas promoted a belief in Black spiritual practices particularly in the plays of Georgia Douglas Johnson.

that matter, serve as a space that offers both celestial devotion and physical protection for Black folk, thus doubling as a spiritual as well as a physical sanctuary.

African American religious/spiritual practices are not easily discernible from African centered rituals. In fact, it is the rituals that constitutes a diasporic connection vis-à-vis “cultural practices that negotiate the dynamics of power to create new liberatory possibilities” (*The Past as Present* 169). Baptism – a sacred act of cleansing and spiritual renewal – is one of those rituals. Take for instance Elam’s examination of Bynum’s baptism in Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*. Elam’s reading is quite informing and offers a productive way to consider how baptisms work in *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*. Elam writes,

The presence of water in Bynum’s vision symbolically binds him to [. . .] the important of water as a regenerative force within African and African American rituals of conversion. The experience of baptism was and continues to be performed in the black church at the water’s edge and to involve the total submersion in water. As a result of this ritual ceremony, the baptismal subject is “born again” within Christian faith. Deliberately infusing Christianity with an African sensibility, baptism confirms the presence of the spirit within the African American initiate. (*Past as Present* 189).

The ritual act of baptism that Elam describes functions similarly in *Texas Treasure*. After Jordan gives details of her baptism, she connotes the feeling of being cleansed, renewed, and restored as she was “extended the right hand of fellowship” and “was no longer a sinner” (3). And like Bynum who receives a “Binding Song,” Jordan, too, is “born again, filled with the spirit, and endowed with the power of [. . .] song” (*Past as Present* 189): “my sisters and I formed the Jordan Sisters. We would be scheduled to sing on various programs” (4). Jordan’s lead song was “Let Us Go Back to the Old Landmark.” Comparable to Bynum’s “Binding Song,” Jordan, too, was very much in tune with the

power of song, for she recognized the power of messages embedded within: “I didn’t know what that was, the landmark; but the “let’s all go back” was the message. So even though I thought of leaving Texas I’ve come back to my landmark. And I want to be your senator” (4).

In addition to church, school was also an institution of liberation for Jordan. Just as the church served as a spiritual sanctuary, schools have also been considered – at least for Black communities – an intellectual sanctuary. In *Texas Treasure*, Jordan details her experiences at Phylis Wheatley High School. Not only did she learn to drive at Wheatley High School, but Jordan just as well began creating a public persona for herself. However, the development of her public persona was not without its share of obstacles.

For instance, when approached by Miss Evelyn Cunningham, dean of the girls, to run for tenth-grade attendant to Miss Wheatley, another teacher at the school, Jordan declined: “No Mam, I feel I would be totally out of place. No Mam, I do not want to attend Miss Wheatley. Maybe I should try something else” (4). Instead, Jordan thought it would be best set her sight on “girl of the year. Girl of the year is a better thing to be than an attendant, because all of the clubs and organizations give you a gift. And, you won’t be attending anyone else. I am really going to work toward girl of the year. I’ll join with those school clubs which are most respected, the Wheatley Lovable Troubadours and the All Girls Choir” (5). At first read it seems as though Jordan is circumventing a lesser position for one of greater privilege and esteem. But there’s more to the story – parts of Jordan’s narrative that Dickerson and Gravatt do not include in the play. That is, Jordan’s bout with intra-racism. In her auto-biography, Dickerson elucidates on her reasons for not wanting to run for a position as Miss Wheatley’s attendant.

There was one teacher I didn't like too well, because I felt that she was *color-struck* – that's what we called it. I felt that she favored all the people who had fair skin and good hair. Teachers of her bias favored those who had hair that wasn't nappy, hair that didn't require Excellento, straight hair. That's what it was: a better grade of hair. This was a really big factor that all of us could see clearly, and one reason that I could always detect when favoritism was being shown by the teacher to half-white kids was that they became the attendants of Miss Wheatley, the student elected as the symbol of the high school. (*Self-Portrait* 65)

What Jordan identifies, or rather cites here is the long history, and still observable trend, within Black communities that lighter-skin folks are considered more favorable among blacks and whites alike.<sup>50</sup> “[R]eferred to as “colorism” or “color-consciousness,” having a “color complex” or being “color-struck,”” explains theatre and performance scholar Faedra Chatard Carpenter, “the phenomenon of intra-racism [is] based upon phenotypical appearance—most notably, the shade of one’s skin” (“Addressing the “The Complex”-ities of Skin Color”15). And as Jordan’s own history evidences, intra-racism is especially prevalent among younger generations particularly school-aged children.<sup>51</sup>

It is important to mention, as Carpenter contends, that intra-racism stems from “institutionalized racism that began with the American slave trade,” thus being “symptomatic of inter-racial prejudice and oppression” (17). Carpenter continues, “With statistics demonstrating that light-skinned blacks have fared better than dark-skin blacks in terms of their economic, social, and political status, it is evident that skin-color distinctions have had real, material consequences” (“Addressing the “The Complex”-ities of Skin Color” 18). The “real, material consequences” Carpenter speaks of often

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<sup>50</sup> It should be noted that intra-racism is not a phenomenon found only within Black communities. For more on the history and consequences of intra-racism within other racial and ethnic groups, see *Race and Colorism in Education* edited by Carla Monroe; “The Significance of Skin Color in Asian and Asian-American Communities: Initial Reflections” by Trina Jones; “Colorism Among South Asians: Title VII and Skin Tone Discrimination” by Taunya Lovell Banks.

<sup>51</sup> For more on intra-racism within schools see *Race and Colorism* edited by Carla Monroe.

manifests into a spiritual and psychological torment that in-turn plays out in how one navigates and negotiates within their everyday lives. For example, Jordan writes in her auto-biography:

Now I was learning that the world had decided that we were all Negro, but that some of us were more Negro than others. The whole system at that time was saying to us that you achieved more, you went further, you had a better chance, you got the awards, if you were not black-black with kinky hair” (*Self-Portrait* 62).

A closer look at the literature on intra-racism will also illustrate that colorism is very much a gendered phenomenon. For instance, when Jordan references the dynamics that exist between kinky/nappy hair and straight hair she brings attention to the notion “that skin color has more bearing on the lives of African American women than of African American men” (Hill 78). This is in part because Black men, too, have participated in racist social constructions of beauty, thus purporting the false binary that women who have certain physical characteristics such as lighter skin, lengthier hair, and/or phenotypical traits that mirror Western-European features are more beautiful.<sup>52</sup>

It is unclear as to why Dickerson and Gravátt chose to leave out a crucial part of Jordan’s personal history. I surmise that because the play was intended for young audiences the dramatists wanted to offer a sanitized version of African American history resulting in a narrative where Black folk are not implicated in colorist ideologies. Although an adverse aspect of African American history and culture, colorism is, nonetheless, a significant experience for Jordan for she admits that she too “had accepted the judgement of the times. . .” (*Self-Portrait* 65). As such, Jordan was indoctrinated in a

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<sup>52</sup> For more on this topic see *Color Stories: Black Women and Colorism in the 21st Century* by JeffriAnne Wilder and *Colorstruck: Skin Color Stratification in the Lives of African American Women* by Margaret L. Hunter

system of intra-racial hierarchy thus leading her to believe that she needed to seek extracurricular activities where she would be validated without the consequential effects of colorism: “I have to get good grades so I can get into the honor society, maybe I’ll be president of that. I need something that will make me stand out” (5). Upon further deliberation, Jordan realized where her talents would be best recognized: “I know – debating” (5).

After joining the high school debate team Jordan gained a new sense of empowerment. The issue of colorism aside, more academically-inclined pursuits allowed her to shine – through positive self-conception as well as audience validation – in a way that other activities, such as sports and social clubs, did not. Jordan states: “We declaimers and debaters felt self-important with the little box of 3X5 index cards on which we kept our notes. They were our badge of superiority over the others who could not do things like that” (5). From a Black feminist standpoint, Jordan substantiates what pioneering Black *feminist* scholar Patricia Hill Collins denotes in her groundbreaking book *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment* regarding Black women as agents of knowledge. “Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance” (221). Precisely, by joining the debate team and challenging herself with intellectual pursuits Jordan opposed the social conditions which denied her access into certain spaces, accordingly finding an empowering-liberatory voice through activities that required an acquisition of knowledge.

In the next moment of the play, which is written as a flashback scene, Jordan demonstrates her intellectual prowess as she delivers a small portion of a speech from a high school debate competition. Speaking on the subject on integration, Jordan states:

Our country is made up of variety of groups and each should have its place. There is no cause for the continuation of segregation and discrimination, which will always bring conflict and confusion. The sands of time are slowly running out and the funeral dirge will soon be heard for segregation. But there should be no weeping on our part, for we should welcome the day when we are no longer forced to live in a segregated and discriminated community. (6)

Jordan informs her constituents that she did in fact stand out: “The word came in my senior year: We have selected Barbara Jordan Girl of the Year 1952.” Her announcement is supported by the stage directions, gesturing as if to replay the moment she discovered she had won the notable award: “Drops index cards to her side, pauses. With applause, bows/curtseys and acts surprised/coy, steps off block, cross down stage center” (6). As the flashback concludes, Jordan reassumes her role as campaigner and assures the audience that her strident efforts in high school would be mirrored if she wins the senatorial election: “Just as I worked to win girl of the year, I’ll work for you in Austin” (6).

Jordan’s speech on integration is quite telling. For starters, her speech, delivered in 1952, precludes a complex juncture within African American history as it predates four major moves towards integration within the 1950s/60s Civil Rights Movement: The Brown vs. Board of Education Supreme Court Case of 1954, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968. These four acts, respectively, outlawed discrimination and segregation within schools; outlawed discrimination and segregation within places of employment and other public spaces; outlawed discriminatory voting practices; and provided for equal housing opportunities regardless of race, creed, or national origin. As such, Jordan’s high school debate speech hints at what was to soon take shape in the mid-twentieth century.

Moreover, Jordan's speech locates her within a genealogy of Race women – Black women intellectual-activists of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries – who believed strongly in the idea of integration. These women include Mary Church Terrell, Mary Mcleod Bethune, Pauli Murray, and Gloria Richardson, among others.<sup>53</sup> A complex subject in and of itself, integration is often relegated to be a fundamental aim of the Civil Rights Movement. And yet, integration was not readily accepted by many of the more radical voices of both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements for they believed integration was predicated on white acceptance and approval. For instance, historian Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar contends that “Integration was a one-way street that assumed that majority white was normative and desired” (“Rainbow Radicalism” 226). However, not only does the history of integration precede the Civil Rights Movement, but a survey of the work of aforementioned Black women intellectual-activists, including Jordan, evidences that the task of seeking integration did not mean the desire for white approval, but rather the idea of integration gave them hope that Blacks could acquire resources and take advantage of opportunities otherwise not afforded to them because of segregation. Additionally, many of them, like Pauli Murray, believed that by integrating schools, not only would Black students receive adequate education because of resources, but they could also prove that they were not intellectually inferior to white students. In sum, the consensus among these women – which is exemplified in Jordan's speech – was that although integration may not have been a largely popular goal within African American communities, many folks

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<sup>53</sup> For more on Black women intellectual-activists who have advocated for integration, see the following texts: *Fight On!: Mary Church Terrell's Battle for Integration* by Dennis B. Fradin, Judith Bloom Fradin; *Mary McLeod Bethune: Words of Wisdom* by Chiazam Ugo Okoye; and *Beyond Respectability: The Intellectual Thought of Race Women* by Brittney C. Cooper.

were nonetheless cognizant that Black communities would continue to face socioeconomic restrictions if they were to remain segregated from the dominant culture.

Developing her strengths as both an orator and rhetorician Jordan won several debate competitions including the “Ushers Oratorical contest in Waco. I won first prize: 50 dollars and an all expense paid trip to the national competition in Chicago” (6). Jordan was enthused about “the big night”: “I wore my pink evening dress from the All Girls’ Choir Recital. I sat with the other contestants, all male, in the Greater Bethesda Baptist Church choir loft. We drew for order of speakers. When my turn came, I let them have it” (6). Jordan’s debate speech at the national competition in Chicago paralleled her speech on integration as she spoke on what she felt were “pressing social problems” (6). The central argument of Jordan’s speech was that “the necessity for a higher education is more in demand today than a decade ago because today’s youth are living in a confused world. [. . .] Folks, a higher education is on the way in. It’s the only way out of the fix you’re in” (6-7).

Heeding her own advice, Jordan shares that after graduating high school she enrolled in Texas Southern University (TSU), “one of the so-called instant universities established under the separate but equal doctrine of Plessy v. Ferguson” (7). Jordan asks the audience if they’ve ever heard of the landmark case. She goes on to explain that “Plessy vs. Ferguson was a court case that said that black students could be educated separate from white students as long as institutions were equal” (7). One of the results of the case, as Jordan explains, was the burgeoning of instant schools such as Texas Southern University that “sprang up all over the country to keep black students out of white universities” (7). Though Jordan uses the phrasing “instant schools,” the more

accurate moniker is Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Providing African Americans with the opportunity to receive a postsecondary education as they were restricted from historically white institutions of higher education, the history of HBCUs has a direct correlation with the history of segregation. Upholding her argument that higher education was necessary for African Americans as she believes it offers a “way out of the fix,” Jordan laments, however, “this black student was happy to be in any university whether it was instant or not” (7).

Wanting to continue her “list of honors,” Jordan attempted to run for student body president (7). She professes, however, that freshmen students were unable to take on a position of that magnitude during their first year of school. As a result of Texas Southern University’s policy, Jordan opted to “stick to what was familiar, the prestigious 3X5 cards” (7). With Mr. Thomas Freeman’s coaching, Jordan’s skills developed even more: “my debate coach showed me that I was good at projecting myself, but not good at thinking. The way he taught us to think was by tossing out ideas and letting us argue back so we could practice our skills” (7). And while the debate team allowed Jordan and her teammates the opportunity to voyage “over the country,” it also proved to be Jordan’s greatest lesson in racial discrimination. While travel for Black folk symbolized freedom as it was very indicative of Black slaves traveling the underground railroad to free spaces, Jim Crow laws still made black mobility a dangerous encounter. Psyche Williams-Forsen explains, “The experience of freedom brought on by mobility is momentarily disrupted to include an understanding of how many aspects of the American travel landscape – restaurants, rest areas, and gas stations – were harbingers of hostility for black people” (*Building Houses out of Chicken Legs* 116). Getting her “first exposure to travel in the

white world,” Jordan soon learned that America’s race problem and the advent of the color line was not limited to segregated schools and whites-only water fountains. Indeed, Jordan and her teammates experienced racial turmoil that explicitly plagued America’s highways and byways.

In the next moment of the play, Jordan cites a complex history of Black motorists who found themselves vulnerable to America’s roadways. Accordingly, Black motorists created plans and developed strategies which often consisted of sleeping in their cars and putting to use makeshift bathrooms to avoid the harassment of white business owners, white cops and white residents of the towns in which they traveled. Jordan states, “We would pack the car with boxes of fruit and sandwiches and fried chicken, so as not to be dependent on locating black cafes in the states bordering Texas” (7). What Jordan alludes to here is the use of “shoe-box lunches” which, according to Williams-Forsen, are lunch boxes fashioned from shoe boxes that contained foods that “traveled well” (116). In other words, the foods they brought along during road trips could sustain long travel without refrigeration and be consumed without needing to be reheated.

Jordan further recalls, “We had a map circled with black motels” (8). Although not explicitly stated, it is more than likely that the team used one of the travel guides that steered African Americans away from danger during travel. Specifically, these travel guides listed “businesses that served African Americans across the country, including restaurants, hotels, and taverns. . .” (Ferris 249). A list of the travel guides includes *Hackley and Harrison’s Hotel and Apartment Guide; Travel Guide*; and *Grayson’s Guide: The Go Guide to Pleasant Motoring* (Taylor, “The Roots of Route 66”). Of the travel guides, Victor Hugo Green’s *The Negro Motorist Green Book* was most notable as

it was the longest running publication to serve Black motorists. Even after Green's death in 1960, the book continued to be updated and published by his wife. However, the book was discontinued as there seemed to no longer be a need because of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that made it a law to discriminate and practice segregation within public spaces and businesses.

In one incident, Jordan remembers coach Tom being disgruntled by the racial angst of the time:

Tom carried on a continuous argument with the service-station attendants because the only restrooms they offered were for men and women. Colored has to use an outhouse in a field. One evening, when the food boxes were empty, Tom had finally had enough. He stormed into a barbecue place determined to get food for his debaters. The man told him, "If you bring them around to the back door of the kitchen they can eat there." So, we swallowed our pride and took what we could get. (8)

Returning to her present-day speech, Jordan uses the moment to make a larger connection with America's race problem and constitutional rights. "No American should have to go to the back door of government. This is a government of the people, by the people, and for the people" (8). Jordan reassures the audience that progress has indeed been made with regards to the color line citing Rosa Parks and her opposition to white supremacy by refusing to give up her bus seat in Montgomery, Alabama as one of the catalyzing events to usher in the Civil Rights Movement. In the same moment, however, Jordan counsels her constituents to remain patient as she reminds them that it took nine years since the Montgomery Bus Boycott for the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to be enacted. Jordan proclaims: "But now, you have the right to sit wherever you want on any public conveyance. You have the right to walk into the front door of Neiman Marcus and expect to be treated like a human being" (8). Further affirming their rights, Jordan reminds the

audience of their role within the American electoral process, specifically reinforcing her role as a candidate: “So, if you send me to Austin, I will work to open the front door of opportunity for you” (8).

Believing strongly in the notion that “Someone had to push integration along in a private way,” Jordan announces that she was going to attend a law school. However, Jordan “had no fixed notion of what that was” as she “had only seen one female black lawyer in my lifetime” (9). That black woman lawyer was Edith Sampson. Jordan was deeply inspired by Sampson whom she met while she visited her high school on career day. By the time Jordan had met her, Sampson had already established her own law firm, was one of the pioneering women to argue before the U.S. Supreme Court, had been appointed assistant state’s attorney prosecutor for Cook County in 1947, and was the first African American named to the permanent United States delegation to the United Nations in 1950.

It is not surprising that Dickerson and Gravátt made sure to include Parks and Sampson in the script thus paying homage to two Black women that inspired Jordan’s activist work. In doing so, furthermore, they also give reverence to the long, yet often unrecognized history of Black women who have contributed to the progression of America’s (and the world’s) culture of politics.

Shockingly, Jordan’s desire to attend Harvard Law School was halted by Coach Tom Freeman. He said to her, “You can’t get into Harvard. But, you can get into Boston University and that’s right across the river from Harvard. You can get in there” (9). One wonders if Freeman’s hesitance of Jordan applying to Harvard Law School was racialized? Gendered? Or, perhaps both? Intrinsically, one ponders if Jordan would have

indeed been admitted into Harvard Law School had not she been met with patriarchal undermining. “I’ll go to Boston and learn to be a lawyer,” proclaimed Jordan.

Upon arriving to Boston Jordan felt out of place in what she recalls was a “predominantly white, almost entirely male” arena. Under extreme duress, Jordan states:

I looked in the mirror and said to myself: “What in the world Barbara Jordan are you doing here” [. . .] In class, everything was so different. Contracts! Property! Torts! Can you understand how strange these words were to my ears? The only thing that sounds familiar to me is criminal law, because you can read in the newspaper about murder and rape. I can understand a burglary. The contracts professor started marching up and down talking about promisor and promise and I said, “For crying out loud.” (10)

Boston University’s Law program was quite rigorous for Jordan. But what was even more eye-opening for Jordan was the impact of a segregated education: “I thought I had learned to think at TSU, but I realized starkly that the best training at an all-black instant university was not equal, no matter what Plessy v. Ferguson said” (10). It is not so much that Jordan believed she received inadequate education at Texas Southern University, but rather what is indicated through Jordan’s observation is that HBCUs, especially state (public) funded institutions, have historically been neglected as compared to historically white institutions who are also state funded. The lack of funding for these schools leads to several concerns including a deficit of resources that allows students to actively compete with (white) students at historically white students. However, it should be noted that a lack of resources does not equate to intellectual inferiority. To that note, Jordan remained determined in her quest to obtain her law degree expressing that she “didn’t get much sleep in those days. I was lucky if I got three or four hours because I had to stay up. I could not afford to flunk out. I knew I had to work my tail to the bone, if I was going to graduate. And I did” (11). Jordan’s family were equally proud when she graduated from

Boston University as her father “went out and purchases a 1959 Oldsmobile 98. Black, spanking, brand-new as long as a city block” (11).

### A Disruption of the Archive

*Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* is not just a script meant to be performed. It is indeed an archive of sorts. It is a performance archive that gives insight on Black feminist solo dramas and performance practices. It is an archive that sheds light on historic and cultural moments within the African American experience. Most significantly, it is an archive that expounds on the life of a pioneering Black woman political figure. Thus, I was both amazed and dismayed to learn that page twelve of the thirteen-page script was missing. This raises a host of questions: How does a page go missing from a performance script? What of future productions? Was it removed out of malice? Forgotten due to a staff member’s carelessness? Or, was it just a case of misfortune?

Upon discovering that the page was missing, I immediately contacted Joshua Hardcastle, dramaturg and staff member of the Education and Community Engagement program at the Alley Theatre in Houston, Texas. I informed Joshua that the script had a missing page. He assured that he would do his best to locate the missing page, but due to Hurricane Harvey, the theatre had temporarily closed its doors and it would be a week or so before they move back into their theatre building. Joshua also professed that he was “worried that the page is gone, as the department went through a poor archival period during the first decade of the 2000s” (Hardcastle). Unfortunately, Joshua did get back in touch with me and explained that he was unable to locate the missing page.

Returning to the script, Jordan's dialogue alludes to what happens on the missing page: she won the election and became the first Black woman to take a seat in the Texas Senate.

Well it looks like the third time is the charm. Let's get dressed and go to True Level Lodge for a celebration. I've just wiped him out. I won't know what the next step is until I get there. I know that when I went to TSU and Chicago and Boston, I took everything I had learned before. And that's what I'll do this time. [. . .] Nothing can stop me now. (13)

*Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure* debunks that myths that Black women have no history, no agency, and are powerless within a world that has worked to keep them silent and hidden from historical accounts. With this play, Glenda Dickerson and Lynda Gravatt have challenged the ways in which historical accounts – especially biographies – are taken up. Furthermore, they've succeeded in bringing another hidden figure to centerstage.

### **Coda: Glenda Dickerson and her “Sistah Playwrights”**

This dissertation, “Staging Black Women’s Histories: Recovery and Recuperation in the Theatre of Glenda Dickerson,” aimed to revive Glenda Dickerson, whose lengthy career traversed the terrains of Black Theatre, feminist performance, community-oriented applied theatre, and pedagogically-inclined theatre. Accordingly, this dissertation asked the following questions: How and where is Glenda Dickerson situated within the cultural and historical genealogy of African American and Black feminist performance? What were her contributions to African American theatre and Black feminist performance? How does Glenda Dickerson revive women’s histories, memories, and narratives through performance?

In answering these questions, I first provided a genealogy of Dickerson’s life and career in the theatre, specifically highlighting some of the historical and sociocultural influences that shaped her life and work. Notable is the fact I discussed Dickerson’s early fascination with oral interpretation and how she was inspired by two Black women who, through their own strident efforts, helped to usher in new voices within mainstream-commercial theatre: Lorraine Hansberry (whose 1959 Broadway play *A Raisin in the Sun* changed the theatrical landscape forever) and Ellen Stewart (whose founding of the off-off-Broadway theatre company, La Mama Experimental Theatre Club, exposed her to a theatre that crossed cultural boundaries). What is important to underscore is how these experiences illustrated for Dickerson that Black women can and do break barriers within white and male dominated (theatre) spaces. These early moments prepared Dickerson to embark on a new journey at Howard University where she would study under Black

theatre luminaries such as Whitney LeBlanc, Eleanor Traylor, James Butcher, Ted Shine, Anne Cooke Reid, Marian McMichael, and Owen Dodson.

This dissertation then charts a trajectory of Dickerson's theatrical career, from her early career as a teacher at Howard University to her contributions in developing a Black theatre community in Washington, D.C. during the 1970s (thereby launching the careers of many noted performers, directors, designers, and choreographers) to her breaking ground as the second Black woman to direct on Broadway with the 1980 production of *Reggae: A Musical Revelation*. Additionally, I pay close attention to the burgeoning of Dickerson's Black feminist consciousness where she began to conceive and direct women-centered works throughout the 1980s that not only bolstered her career, but also placed national attention on a host of Black women playwrights during the 1980s. This impressive feat directly addresses the question regarding Dickerson's contribution to the African American theatre and Black feminist performance.

Undoubtedly, Glenda Dickerson had an impressive career in the theatre. As a playwright, there was a level of autonomy Dickerson has as she adapted and conceived new works for the stage. However, there were many challenges she faced as a director because of her race and gender. Breena Clarke, co-author of *Re/membering Aunt Jemima*, wrote in her essay that memorialized Dickerson upon her death: "Glenda's been called "difficult." But you and I know that that's just a patriarchal code for a woman who's not reluctant to be intelligent, articulate, and uncompromising" (33). I took the opportunity to explore Clarke's statement during our interview. During our interview, I asked her Clarke to elaborate on what she meant when she wrote that Dickerson was often perceived as "difficult." Clarke stated the following:

Theatre has its own little set of rules and decorum in how people are supposed to behave. And directors, and up until I worked with Glenda, they were all male directors, they could kick their heels and be temperamental and get their own way and do a fair amount of bullying. And that was considered part of the job. Glenda did, likewise, those things. You know, she would try, sometimes, in order to get the performance she was looking for she would do, she would bully somebody. (Clarke)

Interestingly, the term “bully,” is an idiom frequently used in the theatre to indicate a no nonsense, tough director whose expectations often exceeded the reality of the situation.

Many directors employ the concept of breaking an actor down through strenuous measures and then building them back up in preparation for the role they will embody for the performance. More significantly, as Clarke denotes, it is a perception and practice often expected of male directors. One wonders, then, if Dickerson was a (white) male director, would her rigid approach and high standards as a director been more accepted and appreciated?<sup>54</sup> Clarke contextualizes her point about Dickerson’s arduous style of directing.

She could get people to do stuff, even if it looked like it was outside of what they were accustomed to doing. Even if it looked like it was a little risky to do it. But I think mostly, well, she could be tough. She could be tough on people. So obviously there were those who would have resisted that. Yeah, she could be tough on some people. I guess part of that, though, too is that those were tough times in theater. I mean people were accustomed to being kind of, you know, poked at and criticized in theater. And to tell you the truth, it was a thing that was kind of popular, especially for a director to be, you know, to criticize people loudly. To be pushy and, you know, aggressive. And it was one of the things that I never liked, you know, either. I didn’t like that, and I didn’t think that you could actually accomplish anything by that. However, one of the things that Glenda knew how to do was, I think, to understand people and push them to the point where they began to viscerally understand what they were supposed to be doing. (Clarke)

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<sup>54</sup> Vinnette Carroll, the first Black woman to direct on Broadway was also considered to be a tough director. For more on this, see Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow’s *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century*.

What Clarke describes, in terms of directors being demanding, is not uncommon among directors – both men and women. However, it is understood that men directors can be demanding while women directors were abhorred for similar practices. Anne Fliotsos and Wendy Vierow address this dichotomy in their book, *American Women Stage Directors of the Twentieth Century*. They write, “Acting as an authoritative figure can have negative consequences for women directors no matter how they choose to handle a situation. If women wield authority in a different style from men, it is seen as abnormal. [...] [W]hen women wield authority in the same way that men do, it is also seen as abnormal” (15). Historically, as well as culturally, authority has been constructed as a masculine trait and therefore when women are figured who hold authority, they are often resented.

According to Fliotsos and Vierow, “Labels such as ‘dragon lady’<sup>55</sup> or ‘bitch,’ are at times applied to strong women directors” (16). Unfortunately, Dickerson had firsthand experience with this type of dichotomous treatment. Lighting designer and theatre historian Kathy Perkins offers insight. During the 2014 Black Theatre Network conference plenary session, “Reflections: Glenda Dickerson and Black Feminist Theatre,” Perkins addressed how Dickerson was “aware of all the terms that people used to refer to her as being a bitch, a ballbuster” (Perkins, “Reflections”). Perkins’ reflection of Dickerson’s career directly aligns with what Fliotsos and Vierow consider “a double standard in temperament” (16). This double standard certainly took its toll on Dickerson

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<sup>55</sup> The term “dragon lady” is a derogatory racial-slug that is used to describe East Asian and South Asian women who do not subscribe to traditional ideals of Asian femininity. In referencing the term in *American Women Stage Directors*, the authors mention the experiences of Chinese American director Tisa Chang (15-18).

career. As Perkins puts it, it “impacted where she could and could not work in professional theater.” Perkins continues:

I mean her work began to decline in professional theater because she was very outspoken. In this business, if women make demands they're being bitches. When men make demands, they're being professional. So, you know, she would get a reputation: ‘well, you know, she's a bitch, don't her.’ I've been in theaters where people say, ‘well, someone had recommended her, but she's difficult to work with.’ And Glenda was very much aware of that, so that's not a secret. (“Reflections”).

What one gathers from Perkins' reflection of Glenda Dickerson is that she had a reputation that preceded her – a reputation as an excellent and sought-after director and, unfortunately, a difficult director. It is precisely, however, these types of challenges that offers a closer look into the discriminatory practices within the world of theatre for women – be it mainstream commercial theatre or academic theatre. Dickerson, however, is exemplar of how Black women have had to push through the bounds of racism and sexism within theatre. Moreover, Dickerson's history within professional theatre illustrates why and how many Black women, namely Barbara Ann Teer and Vinnette Carroll, chose to create theatre outside of mainstream circles.

What can be gleaned from my charting of Dickerson's theatrical career is that she was a complex artist that was committed to pushing the boundaries of both Black theatre and feminist theatre. Pushing the boundaries, for Dickerson, often meant disrupting normalcy and intervening into spaces that were exclusionary in their practices. For instance, where Black theatre is concerned, Dickerson ensured that Black women, and other women of color, were brought in from the margins and replaced centerstage. And where feminist theatre is concerned, Glenda Dickerson intervened to ensure that her white-women colleagues were cognizant that race and class as well as gender do, in fact,

matter. To that point, I argue that Dickerson makes a Black feminist intervention into feminist theatre theory as she challenged her white women colleagues in academic theatre to go beyond gender as a determining factor in theorizing women's subjectivities. With her own critical essays, in which I reference throughout this dissertation, Dickerson employs an intersectional approach to understand both her own role as a theatre practitioner and pedagogue as well as the very subjects she centers within her practical work. Theatre scholar and one of Dickerson's closest friends and confidant, Judith Stephens Lorenz, may have expressed it best when she stated that Dickerson, "guarded against male supremacy, or a patriarchal attitude in Black theatre. And she guarded against white supremacy, and white exclusive attitudes in feminist theatre" (Lorenz, "Reflections"). This perspective is also demonstrated within her creative work.

A closer look at Dickerson's scholarship and practical work also suggests that she was not only developing a Black feminist theatre theory, but perhaps was a progenitor of performance studies. E. Patrick Johnson's important essay, "Black Performance Studies: Genealogies, Politics, Futures," is a great start for thinking about this claim. Johnson argues that "black performance provides a space for black culture to reveal itself to itself—to come to know itself, in the process of doing" (449). As Johnson puts it, Black performance and its constituents—such as rituals—allow Black folks to "understand, reinforce, and reflexively critique who they are in the world" (449). Within her essays, Dickerson theorizes her intellectual and practical shifts thus revealing how performance—both on the stage and in everyday life—have shaped her identity which in turn was reflected within her creative works. Within her creative works, such as the *Kitchen Prayer Series*, Dickerson used performance to both stage the everyday lives of

ordinary people while simultaneously opening space for her audience to intervene and participate in the construction of the performances by sharing their own stories and, perhaps, being reflexive about their own identities within the moment. To this point, I make the argument that Glenda Dickerson stands alongside the innovators that E. Patrick Johnson names as those who are “primed to transform the way Black performance studies gets theorized” (461). Joining the ranks of celebrated scholar/artists such as Joni L. Jones/Omi Osun, Keith Bryant Alexander, and Thomas DeFrantz, among others—Glenda Dickerson must be recognized as a major force and forerunner of the ever-burgeoning field of (Black) performance studies. This dissertation aims to fully recognize Dickerson’s contributions to both the practical and scholarly arenas of theatre and performance.

A major portion of my dissertation set out to examine a selection of Glenda Dickerson’s unpublished creative works. In studying Dickerson’s contemporary works, my objective was to situate Dickerson alongside contemporary Black women playwrights. I offer detailed analysis of four previously un(der)explored plays. Three of these plays emanate from Dickerson’s *Kitchen Prayer Series* (*Kitchen Prayers: Performance Dialogue on 9/11 and Global Loss*, *Identities on Trial: A Kitchen Protest Prayer*, and *Sapphire’s New Show: The Kitchen Table Summit*) while the final play I examine is *Barbara Jordan, Texas Treasure*. My dissertation is the first study to offer a critical analysis of each of these plays.<sup>56</sup> It is my hope, then, that not only will scholars and critics be invested in future examinations of her works, but that it may inspire academic and community theatres to restage the plays.

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<sup>56</sup> Freda Scott Giles offers a summary of the *Kitchen Prayer Series*. However, I am the first to offer a critical-theoretical reading of the plays.

Through my examination of Dickerson's plays, it is made apparent that what connects each play is a devotion to forging a space where the women characters speak themselves into visibility precisely as they share their herstories through their own words. This, I contend, is the goal of a host of contemporary Black women playwrights such as Lynn Nottage and Danai Gurira, two Black women playwrights whose works are currently dominating both commercial, regional, and academic theatre stages. Two-time Pulitzer Prize recipient Lynn Nottage states:

I think with my work, it's passion meeting purpose. It's singing ourselves into existence. [...] The more we become part of the public record, the more we become part of history. By the sheer act of writing, we are trying to place value on the stories that we're invested in. (Auriemma "Why Theatre Needs More Stories About Black Women Told by Black Women")

Likewise, Danai Gurira, playwright of the Broadway hit *Eclipsed*, for which she won the Charles MacArthur Award for Outstanding New Play or Musical, states:

Through the influence of their storytelling and the ownership of their stories, these women are definitely "singing themselves into existence. [...] Women's voices have been appropriated and not been allowed to have their full breadth and full life. [...] We need to have full ownership of those stories, from women who look like us, so we can have full representation of ourselves. (Auriemma "Why Theatre Needs More Stories About Black Women Told by Black Women")

Both Nottage and Gurira represent artists who are now a part of a genealogy of contemporary Black women playwrights, pioneered by Glenda Dickerson, to "construct and reconstruct history and identity. They incorporate history into their works, ensuring that the histories they tell reveal an otherwise hidden history, a black feminist history that centers women's lives and experiences. They also fully embrace the questions of representation of black women and work to refine and reshape them" (Anderson 115). Another commonality among these Black women playwrights is their commitment to

traveling outside of the U.S. borders within their work to tell stories that are unfamiliar to the everyday audience. As theatre and literary scholar Sandra G. Shannon notes, Black women playwrights “continue to be active agents of change on behalf of women – both in the United States and outside its borders – and they are doing so with an expert command of their craft and the world stage” (“Women Playwrights Who Cross Cultural Borders” 215). Shannon further notes, “Their increased focus upon cross-cultural issues and the passionate activism they bring to expose inhumane treatment suffered by people of color within and outside the United States cast them as a fierce new breed: “sistah playwrights” (216).

In the anthology, *Contemporary African American Women Playwrights: A Casebook* (2007), editor Philip C. Kolin asserted that playwrights such as Sonia Sanchez, Ntozake shange, Aishah Rahman, Suzan-Lori Parks, and Glenda Dickerson are “taking their place as the leaders of the American theatre, creating their own theatrical space, history and mythos” (1). Kolin goes on to state that these Black women playwrights are “heirs of Lorraine Hansberry’s legacy” while “they’ve radically departed her realistic techniques and boldly interrogated and amplified her protests against racism and classism” (1). I contend that playwrights who are rightly taking up space in the theatre whether it be commercial theatre, community theatre, alternative spaces, or academic institutions, are also heirs to the legacy of Glenda Dickerson. Newly established and emerging Black women playwrights today such as Dominique Morisseau, Dael Orlandersmith, Danai Gurira, Lydia Diamond, Katori Hall, Tanya Barfield, Kirsten Greenidge, and Sarah Jones, among others, have all scripted dramas and/or devised performances that have exploded the limits of the stage with pieces that attests to the

status of women who are impacted by the ever-changing social structures within a global society.

One of the major lessons I learned in writing this dissertation is that Glenda Dickerson is not alone. While many of the abovementioned Black women playwrights may have received public notoriety, there are still countless Black women playwrights, and directors, and designers, and producers, and pedagogues, who have yet to be recovered from the hidden cracks of (theatre) history. Suzan-Lori Parks tells us, “through literature and the special strange relationship between theatre and real-life – locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (*Possession*). As instructed, we must keep on diggin’.

-Khalid Yaya Long

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